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J. W. Saxton

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ALL FOR GREED.



"I have confessed, father, I have confessed! . . . but tell me
I can save my soul."

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ALL FOR GREED.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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ALL FOR GREED.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BRIDEGROOM.

TIME wore on, the winter passed over, and early in the spring Monsieur de Vérancour had been brought to regard as admissible the event which had at first appeared in his sight so enormously ridiculous ;—the possible marriage of his eldest daughter with Richard Prévost.

It must not, however, be supposed that this was easily accomplished. Félicie did

not find it sufficient to gain one or two isolated battles; she had a complete campaign to undertake, and her final victory was due only to her patience and consummate good generalship. She never lost her temper and never lost a point; but let what would be the insignificance of her gain of the previous day, she always contrived to add some small gain to it on the following one, so that, in the course of a month or two, by dint of clever treatment, the Vicomte got quite accustomed to his new position, and, in the prospects of her future wealth, consented to lose sight of the fact that his daughter would become the wife of a valet de chambre's grandson. One thing was settled at the very outset, and that was, that the matter should be kept secret; that no word of the future engage-

ment should transpire ; and that not until Monsieur Richard had left D——, and taken rank in the department as Monsieur. de Châteaubréville, should he be presumed to have aspired to the honour of Mademoiselle de Vérancour's hand.

What principally disposed the Vicomte in favour of the coming mésalliance was, that, besides the wealth of the bridegroom, the whole proceeding had about it a character of barter that was serious and satisfactory. There was nothing sentimental in the whole concern. All was business-like and full of calculation. Had the unfortunate Monsieur Richard put himself in the light of an aspiring lover, of a man who, for the sake of becoming Félicie's husband, would sacrifice every other earthly consideration in life, it is probable that

the young lady herself would have crushed his hopes with withering contempt, and it is certain that on such terms the Vicomte would never have consented to accept Monsieur Richard as his son-in-law. But the latter was wise enough to understand this, and he never once alluded to the possibility of his marriage being anything more than a business transaction. This put all parties at their ease, and made the situation clear and comprehensible. Monsieur Richard, having a very large fortune, which, situated as he was, could be of no use to him, found means, through the condescension of the Vérancour family, of securing to himself a status in society, and of being admitted to spend his money among people of rank and birth. This, of course, could not be purchased at too high a rate, and,

in fact, Monsieur Richard got it a vast deal too cheap. On the other hand, Mademoiselle Félicie, instead of being condemned to lead a life of single blessedness in an out-of-the-way province, with not enough to live upon decently, acquired the free disposal of an income much exceeding that of the most fashionable ladies for several miles round. This was as it should be, and there was a sense of fitness in the fact of a Vêran-cour enjoying a hundred thousand francs a year.

The work of renovation and embellishment at Châteaubréville went on apace, and would have been in an advanced stage of completion, had it not been for poor Monsieur Richard's health. The winter had been extremely severe, and the unlucky young man had been a frequent sufferer.

His lungs were said to be delicate, though the fact was made a matter of dispute between two rival practitioners; the old doctor at D—— declaring for the weakness of the chest, and a young doctor, lately settled at Chôlet, taking the part of “nerves,” and at most only tolerating the notion of bronchial susceptibility. But then this new disciple of *Æsculapius* was a man who made light of everything, according to the way of the modern Parisian school. It was a wonder he believed in death,—some said he called it an accident,—and he did not promise to have any success in his provincial sphere. He treated poor Monsieur Richard somewhat severely, never called him “poor” at all, and shrugged his shoulders at those who did. He openly declared that the ailments of

Monsieur Richard were only laziness and self-indulgence, and told him to his face that he would never be well till he took more exercise, lived more in the air, washed more in cold water, and eat fewer sweet-meats. He affirmed that whatever harm there was, came from the liver and the mucous membrane, and that the patient's absurd mode of life was answerable for the whole. But then this young man, Doctor Javal by name, was of a hard and unkind nature, and did not sympathise readily with people who complained overmuch.

It is certain that Monsieur Richard's mode of living was unwholesome, but that struck no one else, for it always has been a theory in France,—in the provinces above all,—that the amount of pampering a man enjoys should be measured only by the

power of paying for that whereby you are to be pampered. Therefore, Monsieur Richard, being rich, was quite right to indulge himself in every possible way,—as he did. The atmosphere he kept up in his room was that of a forcing-house, and when he went out of doors he muffled himself up into a permanent state of perspiration. He had ordered down a neat little brougham from Tours, and drove about with shut windows and a foot-warmer,—never walking save on the brightest, warmest days, and for very short distances. Warm baths he allowed himself with the approbation of the old doctor at D——, who was for ever vaunting their “cooling and calming action!” And sweetmeats he indulged in to a degree that met with the approbation of no one

at all,—not even of Madame Jean, who had to make them. Altogether the winter had severely tried Monsieur Richard, and his appearance was unhealthy, as he would sit shivering over the fire in the salon of the Château, where the inmates never attained beyond a very moderate degree of warmth.

With all this, his impatience to be in the full enjoyment of his riches seemed daily to increase in ardour. He was fretful with desire to see the house at Château-bréville fit to be inhabited, and would sometimes avow to Mademoiselle Félicie that he counted the days and hours till he should have entered upon his new duties as head of one of the principal establishments in the department. Curiously enough, by degrees, as the state of

his health became less satisfactory, fortune appeared intent upon favouring him more. An enterprise in which his uncle had invested a considerable sum, full fifteen years ago,—a copper mine in Chili, and which had been supposed to be an unlucky venture,—suddenly turned up a prize, and Monsieur Richard found himself, from day to day, far richer than he thought. It was evident now that he would enter upon his proprietorship of Châteaubréville without having to deduct from his capital the amount that the improvements there would have cost. Well, Monsieur Richard was a lucky man ! Only it was just at this identical moment that his health gave symptoms of the greatest weakness.

“ Compensation ! ” said the public of D—— ; and perhaps it was so. Perhaps

it would not have been just if, in addition to his extraordinary good luck in every other respect, Monsieur Richard had had the robust health and solid nervous system of some others who have their livelihood to earn. It is a just dispensation of Providence that the possession of great joys and the power of enjoying them seldom go together ; it consoles those who have only the capacity for enjoyment without anything to enjoy, and prevents them from cutting their neighbours' throats, or their own.

But what would most have surprised any English observer, had he had occasion to examine minutely the feelings of the various persons we have introduced to him, would have been to notice the comparative absence of what is usually called "feeling" in any one of them.

Here was a father about to see one of his daughters take the gravest step that ever is taken in a woman's life ; here was a girl under twenty about to assume upon herself the responsibilities of wedlock ; and here was a man about to give all his worldly advantages for the privilege of calling this girl his ;—yet in all this, where was the love ;—where the sentiment, compared to which everything else is as nothing ?

Monsieur de Vérancour, amongst all the objections he saw to Félicie's marriage with Richard Prévost, never adverted to the possible existence of a moral one ; never so much as asked himself whether she would be happy with this man, or whether she could be pure and worthy and good ;—whether, at the end of a few years of such

a union the immortal part of her would be better, nobler than now, or weakened and debased. He simply did not think of anything of the kind, because no one that he ever heard of was in the habit of so doing, and because his duty was merely to place, to establish his children;—having done which, he was entitled to hold up his hand to the Almighty, like Simeon, and chaunt his *Nunc Dimittis* in all confidence. Monsieur de Vêrancour was, as times go, a very excellent father; and no one in their senses would dream of demanding from him an iota more than what he was doing.

And Félicie?

Félicie was, according to the worldly morals of France, a thoroughly right-minded person,—a person upon whom you could count. This means that all the figures

you take the trouble to cast up in relation to her would be found correct; all the calculations you make would be unerring, because you never would have to fear one of those perturbations which are brought about by the ill-regulated, comet-like vagaries of a sentiment. Félicie was reliable. I will not speculate upon what a lover or even a friend might wish, but depend upon it there is not in all France a father or mother who would not be full of pride and delight if heaven sent them only such a daughter as Félicie de Vérancour.

As to Monsieur Richard, the future bridegroom of the fascinating Félicie, his nature was too thoroughly feeble a one to bear the strong tree of love; but he was possessed by an unceasing desire to call the girl his, and only refrained from mani-

festing it because his instinct told him that such a manifestation would be prejudicial to his interests.

One person alone, in this assemblage of eminently reasonable individuals, was unlike the rest, and that person was Vévette. She was a stray flower in this garden of pot-herbs, a wild rose upon the wall destined only to foster fruit. Such being the nature of her character and life, Vévette was not regarded by those around her as altogether safe ; and, if she had not been such a very child, she would have been narrowly watched, and made to undergo a due and proper course of training. It was tacitly understood between the Vicomte and his eldest daughter that whenever the latter became Madame de Châteaubréville, and was the sovereign mistress of her magni-

ficent household, she should take her younger sister to live with her, and do the best she could for her advancement in life. Vévette's "turn," as she had practically expressed it, would then come, and neither Félicie nor her father had the slightest doubt of how exemplary it would be on their parts to contrive that that "turn" should be an advantageous one.

The whole of poor little Vévette's life had been of a kind to mislead her in all her appreciations of herself and of others. She had lost her mother too young to have seen, from her example, how perfect a merely loving woman, aiming at nothing loftier, could be; and she was far too humble to imagine that whatever instinctive sentiment she possessed could be otherwise than blameable. Of course, her convent educa-

tion had been for her, with her peculiar disposition towards timidity and diffidence, the worst possible education. Convent discipline, the most enlightened as well as the worst, can seldom or never be good for any save the haughty and rebellious in spirit, whom it does sometimes modify, and to whom it teaches worldly wisdom as well as the justice of concession. To the naturally meek and humble, convent discipline is simply destruction. It roots up self-reliance and preaches dependence as a virtue, and you may pretty surely predict of a convent favourite that her notions of right and wrong are not innate, but imposed upon her from without.

Now, although poor little Vévotte's nature was too sweet and pure a one to be spoilt by all these mistakes of educa-

tion, her peace of mind was destroyed by them, and her simplicity of heart perturbed. Whilst in reality all her own native instincts were towards the fair and the noble and the generous, she was driven into being perpetually at war with herself, and into believing that whatever she thought, or wished, or did, must be wrong. On all sides she had heard her sister lauded as the pattern of everything a woman should be, and her own inmost soul, when questioned, told her she could not be like Félicie.

It was one of the causes of her love for Raoul, that, recognising as he did the beauty of her nature, he gave her—whether she would or not—a kind of trust in herself. The great cause of the love, however, was the impossibility of avoiding it. They were left to themselves, and they

loved, just as it was natural they should do. But this was precisely one of poor Vévette's greatest troubles. From the same source whence she had drawn her piety, her faith in all divine truths, from that same source flowed a doctrine which condemned her to be incessantly at war with herself. That nature was to be vanquished, and that all love was a sin;—this was the doctrine of her teachers. And what was she to do with such teaching as this?

Instead of loving frankly and gladly, and hopefully and strongly, and finding virtue in the truth of devotion, the poor child struggled against what was best and noblest in herself, and though with her whole heart she loved Raoul, the innocence of the passion was overcast, and she was doomed to the torture of an unquiet conscience.

and to what was worse still, the knowledge that far from bringing happiness to him she best loved, she, by her own uncertainties and alarms, brought him perpetual perplexity and pain.

But in this little out-of-the-way town of D——, events were in store which threatened to force the persons, we have been attempting to describe, out of their conventional parts into the real characters which had been allotted to them in the grave and serious drama of life.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BRIDE.

As the domain of Châteaubréville lay at the other side of the department, to the north-east, if you went from D—— by the road, it was a good half-day's work to get there. The usual manner of performing the journey was to drive over to one of the railway stations on the banks of the Loire, and from thence proceed by rail to the post town nearest to the château itself, whence a vehicle could be despatched to meet you.

This was Monsieur Richard's mode of

proceeding, and it had now become his habit, when he went over to inspect his future residence, to pass one night always, and occasionally two or three, at the château. It took four hours of tolerably good driving, with a rest of half-an-hour at the half-way auberge, to get from D—— to the station, and another good hour and a half were required before landing you at the hall door of Châteaubréville. The expedition, therefore, was not possible in the short days of winter. But Monsieur Richard was growing very anxious that his future wife should give her opinion upon some of the interior arrangements of what was to be her home, and his anxiety would, if he had dared, have been tiresome; as it was, it was only fidgety, and he was for ever recurring to his fear lest too much delay would be

engendered by the want of certain details being positively fixed upon. March was drawing to an end, and the weather had, for the last ten days, been singularly fine, the genial warmth of the sun bringing forth vegetation in what was an exceptional manner even for the soft climate of western France.

It was decided to take a journey to Monsieur Richard's new estate, but to take it in a form that should not awaken the curiosity of the inhabitants of D——. Monsieur Richard himself was to go over to Château-bréville the day before, pass the night there, and prepare everything for the reception of the Vicomte and his daughters on the morrow. The remarkable old conveyance which, in the days of the Restoration, had been a calèche, drawn by two stout per-

cherons, was ordered out, and Baptiste, in his time-worn livery, prepared to get all the work he could out of the one aged horse which on such like occasions had the honour of transporting the Vêrancour equipage of state from place to place.

Why his master and his family were going early in the morning to the N—— station Baptiste did not guess, which was no wonder, seeing that Baptiste was not bright; but the lynx-eyed Suzette, his better half, did not guess it either, which was wonderful. So the Vicomte and the two girls really did accomplish their journey without all the gossips in D—— knowing whither they were bent, and the general opinion was that they had gone to see the Mère Supérieure of a very famous convent on the Nantes Line, in order to arrange for

the noviciate of Mademoiselle Vévette, who was all but certain one day to take the veil.

The N—— station was reached, the down train duly caught, and the party safely set down at the village where Monsieur Richard was to be found in waiting. And there he was sure enough, and all four packed themselves into the vehicle he had brought for their convenience; and the big, finely gilt clock just over the vestibule door was striking one when they got out at what was one day to be Félicie's future home.

The few hours allotted to the visitors—they were forced to leave again at a little after five—were, as you will easily conceive, amply employed by all they had to see. Félicie proved herself thoroughly equal to the duties of her future position, and inspected everything as though she had all

her life been the mistress of a large house, and reigned over a numerous establishment. Nothing was beyond or beneath her; nothing, in fact, out of her competency. She dived down into the kitchens, and soared up into the attics, authoritatively decreeing what was requisite for each individual servant as long as he or she was "in the exercise of their functions" for the master's benefit, and how little was sufficient for them when they were consigned to the privacy of their own rooms. She was brilliant on the subject of pantries, larders, and store-closets, and hit upon all the dry corners in which it was best to keep provisions and linen; and in the wash-houses absolute inspiration visited her, and she overturned all the plans which had been adopted for heating the caldrons, substitut-

ing for them others which were, as she victoriously showed, far more economical. The architect who had been appointed to meet them, and who knew nothing of the names of the persons with whom he spoke, was penetrated with admiration of the wise and omniscient Félicie, and could not help repeating at every fresh defeat of his combinations by her suggestions—"Voilà une petite dame bien entendue!"

Poor Vévette felt, as usual, thoroughly crushed into nothing by her sister's superiority. So did the Vicomte; but then he liked it, which Vévette did not. No true woman can bear to think of herself as femininely inferior, that is, inferior in those qualities which constitute a woman. The decision and practical ability of Félicie overawed Vévette; and feeling that nothing

could ever make her emulate her sister's virtues, she began to regard herself as useless, that is, incapable of imparting happiness; and the inevitable consequence was discouragement and deep self-dissatisfaction. Poor Vévette! She resolutely admired Félicie because she had been told to do so from childhood upwards, but do what she would, she felt she could not like her ways.

This visit to Châteaubréville was a sore trial for Monsieur Richard, for almost all the arrangements to which he had been consenting for four months were disputed and in most cases changed. Of course, on the alterations made in the inside of the house Monsieur Richard had never given an opinion,—he had none,—but had allowed his architect to go his own way, and the architect had aimed chiefly at two things—

filling his own pockets, and giving to the general aspect of the dwelling a sufficient air of richness. In neither of these aims did Mademoiselle Félicie at all acquiesce, and she made comparatively short work with the bourgeois-like splendour which was about to flaunt from every wall and window of the “renovated” old place.

“What on earth has made you think that the panels in this small drawing-room should be gilt?” asked she, smiling, but with at the same time an air of such exquisite impertinence that a spectator must have had a curious idea of what the husband’s life would be who would daily endure such treatment. “What is the use of gilding here?”

“It is richer,” replied both Monsieur Richard and his architect at once.

The elegant Félicie curled her lip, and used an inexpressibly disdainful accent whilst echoing the word "richer!" And she meant this as much for her own sire as for Monsieur Richard, for she could not avoid seeing that the Vicomte was every bit as unable to resist the temptation of what was gaudy as was his base-born son-in-law elect.

"Why, what would you furnish these salons with?" she continued, always imperturbably smiling, and looking so pretty! "Would you hang them with crimson damask?"

"Crimson damask is very handsome," observed the architect, rather abashed.

"Then what is to become of your beautiful old meuble in white wood, and Beauvais tapestry, which is absolutely priceless for any connoisseur?"

“Well,” ventured to remark Monsieur Richard, “Monsieur and I thought of putting that into the rooms up-stairs, and——”

But she quickly cut him short, and laid her law of elegance down, which was manifestly to be without appeal. “No one but parvenus,” said she, mercilessly, though in honey-sweet tones, “ever put gilding and silk or satin stuffs into country houses. Richness, or even pomp, is all very well for a Paris residence, and in your drawing-rooms in Paris you can be as lavish of gold and crimson damask, within a certain measure, as you choose; but freshness is the notion that ought to be inspired by the aspect of a country abode. Renovate, by all means, the old boiserie of these salons, but keep them what they are; wood, plain

wood, white upon pearl grey, and no gold !
—for Heaven's sake, no gold !”

Monsieur Richard looked utterly disappointed, and as if half his satisfaction in his wealth were taken from him. He pleaded for just a little “show,” for here and there a patch of garish colouring or of costly material, and finding no other, he invariably made use of the same argument, and vaunted the richness of what he proposed. Against all the delicate-tinted, though perhaps a little faded, Beauvais and Gobelins furniture, which Mademoiselle de Vêrancour advocated, he opposed his brand new, gorgeous tissues, of which he lugged about a huge roll of patterns. “See how rich this is !” he repeatedly said.

“But it is bad in taste !” was the only answer he got, and this answer reduced him

to silence. And so it was with everything. What he had thought fair or fitting was not discussed, or superseded by something fairer or more fitting ; but the standard by which he could by any possibility judge of its fittingness or fairness was not explained to him. He was put from the starting-point out of the pale of whatsoever was connected with taste !

And I don't say that, from the artistic point of view, Mademoiselle Félicie was wrong, for I am tolerably certain that no teaching and no change of habits could ever have given Richard Prévost the fine perceptions that are requisite to be able to judge the beauty of external objects, just as probably no mere circumstance would have ever destroyed them in Félicie. But it was a hard case, for here were this man

and this woman about to enter upon a compact to exist side by side during the term of their natural lives, without one single point in their respective modes of life being otherwise than calculated to keep them morally asunder.

They went through the house, up-stairs and down-stairs, and every step made it evident how perfectly at home Félicie would be in this fine old mansion when she came to be its mistress, and how no amount of mastership would ever make of Richard Prévost anything else save an intruder. But though each, perhaps, may have instinctively felt this, neither saw in it anything which appeared like a warning, and the man was as ready as before to buy the wife who would despise him, and the wife equally ready to accept the husband with

whom while she lived she could never have one single moment's community of thought.

They rambled through the gardens and shrubberies, and visited greenhouses and poultry-yards and stables, and here, as indoors, the captivating Félicie promulgated her dogmas, and put out of the question all attempt at a retort or a counter-objection by the fatal sentence: "It is not the proper thing," or "It is bad taste."

When the time came for going, Mademoiselle Félicie was well pleased with her expedition, and when she stepped into the vehicle which was to take them back to the station, she felt that upon the whole she had spent a pleasant day. Monsieur Richard could not make up his mind as to whether the day had been altogether a pleasant one to him, and for the first time since they

had met, the future father and son-in-law cherished a sort of mutual sympathy; for they had been equally snubbed by the same person.

At the N—— station who should they meet but the Curé of D——, who had been sent for by the bishop, and was returning to his parish by a late train. They made him the offer of a fifth place in the venerable old calèche, which necessitated the pitiless squeezing together of the two young ladies, but thoroughly convinced Baptiste that the object of the journey had really been the convent at which Mademoiselle Vévette would one day take the veil.

It was striking seven when they started on their homeward course, but the old horse, eager for his stables, did his best, and Baptiste affirmed that they should reach

D—— before the four hours usually required would be over. The night was a warm but windy one; fitful, as the finest nights in early spring are wont to be, and after the moon had silvered the whole road before them and the tall trees along its edge, her light would be suddenly eclipsed by the dusky veil of some swiftly drifting clouds. “We are going through your property here, are we not, Monsieur le Vicomte?” asked the Curé, as the carriage jolted out of a very ill-repaired by-way into a tolerably smooth road skirted by young woods.

“No, no; that’s none of mine,” was the reply. “I wish it were. Les Grandes Bruyères lie much higher up to the left. We have just come across old Rivière’s fields, and at this moment we are entering on Monsieur Richard’s woods.”

“A valuable property,” suggested the Curé.

“Humph!” grunted the Vicomte. “Yes, valuable enough, but atrociously ill kept, I must say.”

“What can one do?” objected Monsieur Richard. “It would be the work of an active stout-bodied man to superintend the cuttings hereabouts. I know that, and old Prosper is assuredly not fit for the post; but if I were to turn him away what would become of the old fellow? He is already in a very shaky state of health.”

“More than that even, Monsieur Richard,” replied the Curé; “the man seems to me absolutely shattered; he is so wasted away as to be but the shadow of himself; and his temper is strangely gloomy.”

“Have you seen him lately?” inquired Monsieur Richard eagerly.

“Not very lately,—and you?”

“Oh! I never see him,” was the prompt rejoinder. “When he comes, he sees Madame Jean, or he goes to the notary.”

“Poor old man!” said Vévette gently; “his must be a sad life up all alone there in his woods. Was he always quite alone in the world?”

“As long as I have known him, always,” answered Monsieur Richard.

“Yes,” added the Curé, “and as far as I know, he was always of the same unsociable disposition; a born solitaire, but, after his fashion, sincerely pious.”

“Poor old man!” said Vévette again.

The carriage rolled and jolted on, and the third quarter past ten was just to be heard

from the church belfry as it came upon the stones at the entrance into D——. “There ends my land,” said Monsieur Richard, as he pointed to a steep wooded bank just outside the town which sloped down into the road. “Up that little path you can go on to the very top of the hill and past M. Rivière’s new farm.”

“And straight up to old Prosper’s hut,” added the Vicomte. “I know the road well, and take it often out shooting. There’s somebody coming down it now ;—just look ! It never can be old Prosper at this hour.” The moon at this moment was shining very brightly, and gave plainly to view the figure of a man coming out of the little winding path into the road. He was evidently about to cross it, but was stopped by the advance of the old horse that was trot-

ting forward under Baptiste's whip. He drew up and waited. The carriage passed, and as it did so the moonbeams fell full upon his face.

"Why, it's Raoul!" exclaimed Félicie.

"Nonsense!" said her father. "Raoul's in Paris doing his office work."

"Besides, what should he be about in the middle of the night on a lonely path leading only through my woods?" muttered Monsieur Richard. "I don't suppose he has conferences with Prosper up in his hut."

"I don't mind that," continued Félicie; "it was Raoul."

Vévette felt a shudder go through her whole being, without knowing what it was that affrighted her.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LITANIES FOR THE DEAD.

A FEW days went by, and it was found to have really been Raoul de Morville whom the Vêrancours had seen coming down into the road on the night of their return from Châteaubréville. But the way in which this was found out was rather strange, and did not leave a very satisfactory impression. Raoul had called upon the Vicomte, and stated that a sudden illness of his father's had summoned him from Paris, and that he had obtained a month's leave of absence

from his office. Old Morville had had a kind of paralytic seizure, and was very weak and ailing; but no one in D—— had heard of this, for little or no intercourse was kept up between the inhabitants of the town and those of La Morvillière.

“When did you come, Raoul?” asked Félicie, carelessly.

“On Wednesday,” was the answer.

“Why, Raoul,” was the rejoinder, with a mocking smile, “you positively do not know what you are saying. You came on Tuesday, and you have been here four whole days without coming to see us. Oh! don’t deny it, for we saw you on Tuesday night coming down into the road by the path leading from the woods. Surely you must have remarked us. You must have recognised Baptiste in the moonlight.”

Raoul looked singularly annoyed and embarrassed, and at last ended by admitting that he had arrived on the Tuesday night, and that, not finding the D—— diligence at the station, he had come on foot, taking a short road across the hill and through the woods.

“Short road, if you will, my lad,” observed the Vicomte; “but it’s a good fourteen miles’ walk.”

“And I really cannot think how you came not to see the carriage. The moon was quite bright just then,” persisted Félicie.

“Well, I think I remember that I did see a carriage,” replied young Morville; “but I certainly did not recognise the man who was driving it. I suppose I was thinking of something else.”

“You must have been deeply absorbed

in your thoughts then," exclaimed Félicie ;
" for Baptiste is not precisely a microscopical
personage, and you have known him ever
since he used to wheel us altogether up
and down the garden in his barrow."

Raoul was evidently uncomfortable, Félicie was malicious in her playfulness, and Vévette was miserable, she neither knew why nor wherefore. The whole was unsatisfactory and odd. Every one thought so, but no one said it.

Vévette felt that some harm threatened Raoul de Morville. What might be its nature, or whence it came, she knew not, but the instinct was as strong as it was sure ; and from the moment in which this unmistakable touch of reality came upon her, all the fictions of her education flew to the winds. Raoul was in danger, and now

she knew how she loved him. What the danger was, what the harm that menaced him,—that she could not define ; but in the dread of his having to pass through some hard and terrible suffering, everything else was lost to her sight. She did not stop to discuss whether it was wrong to love thus ; she did not ask herself even whether she should ever be Raoul's wife ; she simply felt that she would risk life, happiness, everything, sooner than that harm should come to him.

Raoul had avowed,—or rather he had not denied to her, on the last day when they met,—that he had some “trouble.” What was it ? How could she find out ? How could she help him ? Poor Vévette's experience of life was as limited as that of a child, and all that she did know led

her to suppose that no one had any grief unconnected with money. From her earliest memory she had always heard talk of money, and been forced to conclude from what she heard that the aim of every one's life was to keep his own money and add to it that of other people. It is true she had been invariably taught that the mere possessors of wealth were to be despised, and that honour was due alone to good birth; but, at the same time, she had had it strongly impressed on her that the well-born were somehow or other to be made rich, and that in their achievement of riches lay the perfect fitness of things.

Vévette's mere judgment, then, told her that Raoul was probably suffering some grievous pecuniary embarrassment; but

something beyond her judgment, higher than it, told her it was a peril of a graver kind that threatened him. She half determined to consult the Curé, but hesitated for many reasons, one of which was, that Monsieur le Curé himself was just then not so accessible as usual, but seemed to be almost out of temper, and to hold converse unwillingly with those who sought him. On the other hand, Raoul came but seldom to the Château, declaring that his father took up his whole time; and when he did come, Vévette's stolen glances at him were met by looks so mournful in their lovingness, that misery and dread entered deeper and deeper into the poor child's heart. What could be impending?

The Curé had remarked that for many weeks the Breton woodcutter had neglected

attending mass, and though it was not his custom either to note down those who remained away from church, or to think less well of them because they did so, still, the peculiar character of Prosper Morel, and his strong superstitious tendencies, made it strange that he should thus absent himself for a continued length of time from all celebration of divine worship.

One morning in April Monsieur le Curé sallied forth after early mass, and took a turn through the market-place. It was market-day, and all the housekeepers of the town and its environs were busy haggling and clamouring over their bargains. Madame Jean was busier and more authoritative than any one else, for she had the countenance of military authority wherever she went, and woe betide any luckless

peasant woman who might attempt to gain, no matter how little, upon the weight of what she sold, or prevaricate upon the freshness of eggs, butter, or poultry. She would have had to settle accounts with the brigadier, who, on market days, was almost always to be seen in the near neighbourhood of Madame Jean, lending her an importance which neither she nor those about her disdained. But the sword yields precedence to the Church, and "Monsieur Frédéri" fell back respectfully when he saw Monsieur le Curé approaching Madame Jean.

"I wish you would tell me what you know of old Prosper Morel," were the first words addressed by the parish priest to Richard Prévost's housekeeper. "As far as I have remarked, he has been more

than two months without coming to church ; for him that is odd."

Madame Jean looked the Curé full in the face. "Two months!" echoed she; "why, saving your reverence, I don't believe he's put his foot there for—for—let me see," and she counted on her fingers, "one, two, three, four, five—yes, five," and then she mumbled, "March, February, January, December, November—five full months. I don't believe, Monsieur le Curé, that old Prosper has ever been inside the church since the day of the Feast for the Dead."

"Impossible!" retorted the Curé. "I'm quite certain I've seen him since then."

"So you may, but not in church. Seen him! Oh yes, so have I, too;—but how? Hulking and skulking about, crawling

along close to the walls, and never speaking to mortal creature, but making off, if you see him, like an owl with the daylight let in upon him !”

“ But Prosper is a good Christian,” urged the Curé. “ He never would stay away from church in that way.”

Madame Jean turned up her nose, and sniffed the air with a look of something like indignation.

“ Church, indeed !” she exclaimed. “ Why, Monsieur le Curé, if one is to believe all one hears, the old savage—those Bas-Bretons are no better—has been and built himself some sort of a church or chapel of his own, where he keeps up a psalm-singing and a howling day and night, just as if he were a heretic, neither more nor less.”

“Have you spoken to Monsieur Richard about him?” inquired the Curé very calmly, and in no wise allowing himself to be prejudiced.

“Well now, really, Monsieur le Curé,” retorted Madame Jean, “where would be the good of speaking to Monsieur Richard? Primo, he’s always for showing every indulgence towards old Prosper, under pretence that he was nursed by Prosper’s wife; and, secundo, he don’t get stronger or better able to bear worry than he used to be. He’s very weak indeed, is Monsieur Richard, and nobody knows the trouble I have with him only to persuade him to eat a little wholesome soupe grasse, or a white of a chicken, and not to be always stuffing himself with sweets, creams, and jellies, and sugar-plums, that only turn on

his stomach and make him sickly, and shivery, and fractious, just like a baby! And that's what he is, poor Monsieur Richard; for all the world, just like a baby!"

While Madame Jean was delivering herself of this harangue, the Curé had been apparently communing with himself rather earnestly. With one hand thrust into the pocket of his soutane, he employed the other in shifting his black calotte about upon his big head, now bringing it down to his very nose, and then pushing it back to the nape of his neck. Then he suddenly fished up a blue checked cotton handkerchief from the depths of his pocket, blew his nose vigorously, put the kerchief back, rammed both his hands into his pockets, said, "Bon jour, Madame Jean" rather abruptly, and

marched off, across the Place, to the side street which led him up to his own dwelling.

A quarter of an hour later, Monsieur le Curé might be seen, with his broad-brimmed hat upon his head, and a good strong stick in his hand, walking over the stones to the spot where they cease at the entrance into the town of D——. The day was bright and warm, soft and sunny, and though it was only the first week in April, there was green everywhere,—that beautiful, delicate green through which the sun shines so pleasantly, and which is so suggestive of youth,—the youth of the year. When Monsieur le Curé got upon the high road, he suddenly turned to the left, and struck into the little path that led up the bank, and passed, as we have already been told,

through Richard Prévost's woods. He walked on up the hill till at the top he reached a flat part of the country, divided between cornfields and woods; and skirting a field where the young wheat was just beginning to throw its verdant robe over the brown earth, he plunged completely into the shade of the woods, and made for the plantations of tall timber.

In the middle of a clearing, which our pedestrian soon reached, ten long and tolerably straight alleys met, and a board nailed to the stem of a beech-tree informed you that this was called "L'Etoile des dix routes." Between two of these forest avenues, and backed by thick towering woods, in which the axe had not been busy for some years, stood a solid, well-enough built woodman's hut. The door was well-hinged, and the

window-panes unbroken. All looked to be in fairly good order. This was Prosper Morel's abode, and Monsieur le Curé went straight up to the door, knocked at it, and got no answer. He tried to open it. It was locked. He examined the two windows. The board serving as a shutter was up at both. Monsieur le Curé walked round and round, and called Prosper with a loud voice, but got no answer. All was still, and as Monsieur le Curé had had a good stout walk, and had left home before the hour at which he usually partook of his second breakfast, he felt hungry, and not undesirous of a little repose. He seated himself on the log of a felled tree, and took from his pocket a large slice of bread, a piece of cheese, and a book. When he had eaten the bread and cheese, he betook himself to

the book, and read, and rested himself for half an hour. At last he rose, and looked again on all sides, and called, but still no one came ; and so Monsieur le Curé got up to go home, saying to himself, “ I can make out nothing that looks like a chapel.” He proceeded home leisurely and musingly, and every now and then stopping to take off his hat, and rub his hand over his forehead.

He had got more than half way upon his journey back to D——, when he heard what he supposed to be the call of one woodsman to another, or of a shepherd to his dog. He stopped and listened. It was very indistinct ; but still he heard it again. It seemed to be a good way off, and to come from the part where the woods were thickest. At last he clearly made out that the direc-

tion he was taking led him nearer to the sound, and he pursued his path, listening, stopping, and then instinctively holding his breath, in order to listen better. The sound was an inexplicable one—something between a moan and a yell; and as the Curé got nearer, he perceived that it was, in fact, a succession of continuous sounds, and that when the louder cries ceased, they were exchanged for a rapid droning sort of utterance, which at first he could not rightly understand. The wood grew very thick as he advanced, and the path very narrow, winding through tangled brushwood and briars, and extremely damp under foot.

For a moment or two the sounds had ceased, but the Curé kept on his path cautiously, for fear of being heard. Through a break in the bushes he now saw a small

open space where the grass grew high, and at one end of which had been raised a species of shed. It was a queer, rude kind of construction, thatched with straw, quite open as far as one half of it went, and the other half was rudely and imperfectly closed by very clumsily made hurdles. The Curé had hardly had time to render to himself an account of what he saw, when the chanting recommenced.

It was the Litanies for the dead. The droned or muttered parts were the repeated appeals of the actual Litany, whilst the words "Libera me!" were shouted out with terror-stricken force, and with what was really sometimes a perfect yell.

At first the Curé could not see the man who chanted the dismal invocation, for he was seemingly behind the shed, but a few

seconds brought him to view. It was old Prosper Morel, who, with a crucifix in his hands, strode round and round the shed, at a solemn measured pace, and as though following the procession before Mass on All Souls' Day. The woodcutter was so altered that he looked as though twenty years had passed over him. The flesh had apparently dried up, and only wrinkled skin covered the bony structure of the man. The joints seemed absolutely monstrous, and knees, ankles, shoulders, elbows, and wrists stood out in huge disproportion to the shrunk and dwindled portions of the frame they held together. The nose was a very vulture's beak, rising between the two sharp protruding cheek-bones that literally overhung the hollow cavities where the cheeks had sunk in. But what struck you more than all

were the eyes. Naturally enlarged by the shrinking of the flesh from the other features, their balls seemed starting from their sockets. But it was less the glare of the eyes that arrested your attention than their fixity. They appeared invariably to stare at some one object, and the lids did not look as though they could ever close over the eyes themselves.

What with his emaciation, and the patched and tattered condition of his raiment, Prosper was a grim object as he went stalking round and round, staring through space, with his crucifix clutched with both hands, close to his breast, and chanting the Litanies for the dead.

The Curé resolved to watch minutely the movements of the man, and his whereabouts, before coming forward to make

himself known. Accordingly, therefore, as the Breton went to this side or that, he, too, shifted his hiding-place, going from behind one large tree to another. What he saw was this;—there, where the shed was open, there was visible inside it, and at the back, under the slope of the roof, a sort of chapel. Several large logs of wood piled up together, and covered with a sheet, made a kind of altar, and on this were grouped specimens of most of the things used in connection with the ceremonies of the Church. There were images of every description, large and small, in wood and in wax; images of the Virgin and of our Saviour, and of various Saints. There were candlesticks of copper, brass, and tin, with tapers in them; and hung all round there were pictures of Holy Families or Martyrs,

such as you buy from pedlars and hawkers for a few sous.

The back of the shed was formed by a flat blank wall of planks coarsely nailed together and painted black, on which were drawn in white chalk a most confusing mass of hieroglyphical signs and figures, disjointed words, huge capital letters, verses of Psalms, and uncouth portraitures of human beings.

While the Curé was busy trying to make out what these extraordinary drawings could mean, the chanting ceased, and in a few minutes the bûcheron came round with heavy, drawling steps, without his crucifix, but with something in his hand which the Curé could not distinguish. His eyes were still fixed on vacancy, and he was muttering a prayer half aloud. He

walked straight up to the blackened wall, rubbed out a string of words and figures with his sleeve, and with what he held in his right hand began to write down others in their place. The operation was a slow one, but by degrees, as the Curé watched, he saw grow under the old man's fingers the phrase—

“De profundis clamavi”

Just then rang out clearly in the distance the chimes of the church of D——, and the twelve strokes marking the hour of noon. This proved to Monsieur le Curé that he was nearer to the town than he had at first supposed.

He determined now to try the effect of personal communication, and stepping forward from behind the cover of his tree, he

addressed the man. "Prosper Morel," said he, coming straight up to the bûcheron, "what is it you are doing here?" The old man sprang back with an agility you could not have imagined to belong to him, and then suddenly, as it were, collapsed altogether, and fell down at the root of a tall sycamore, huddled up, and with only his two arms stretched out to their utmost length, as though to ward off some attack. "Prosper," repeated the Curé, coming closer, but speaking very gently, "I have not come to harm you. Tell me why you are here?"

But, seemingly, speech was impossible, for the woodcutter only writhed and gibbered, and stretched out his hands against the intruder more and more. At last, by a violent effort, he raised himself

against the trunk of the tree, and stood upright, glowering at the Curé, whose quiet persistence nevertheless appeared to be acting magnetically upon him.

After a few minutes' struggling, speech, though imperfect, came; and then, with a scream of terror, he spoke. "Master! master!" shrieked Prosper, "I won't go alone with you! Take him too;—take him!"

"Do you not know me, Prosper Morel?" asked the Curé, as he thought he perceived some sign of wavering in the man's eye.

"Yes! yes!" he gasped in agony, clasping his hands with convulsive energy. "Know you? yes! It is you who told him to come for me,—told me he would come, and look at me face to face,—but

I won't go ;"—and he threw his arms behind him fiercely, round the trunk of the tree ;—"I won't go alone with him ! Tell him to take the other too,—the other, —the other ! Tell him to take him !" And then his hold relaxed, his knees knocked together, his body bent forwards, and he dropped senseless to the ground.

* * * * *

When Monsieur le Curé reached his home that afternoon he was no wiser than he had been when he left it. He felt that there was something wrong somewhere ; but what seemed to him the most evident result of the whole was that, with his sermon on All Souls' Day, he had completely deranged the old woodcutter's already weak intellect.

But was Prosper only mad? or ?

It was a terrible question, and Monsieur le Curé was sorely perplexed.

CHAPTER XVII.

IS HE MAD?

YES, indeed, Monsieur le Curé was sorely perplexed. The more he thought of it the more he felt persuaded that there was something beyond mental derangement in old Prosper's behaviour. Of proof of this, when the Curé came to cross-examine himself as to what he had actually seen and heard, he could find none. Prosper had always been a strange, gloomy man, weak-witted and superstitious, and nothing was more likely than that what had happened

since his master's death should have completely upset his reasoning faculties. Any doctor accustomed to treat lunatics would regard it as quite an ordinary case; and yet, in spite of this, the Curé felt that there was more and worse in it than this came to, and the thought pursued and haunted him day and night.

In order to recall more clearly to his mind all the minutest circumstances connected with the murder of Martin Prévost, the Curé contrived, very ingeniously as he thought, to provoke conversation upon that subject with all those who had at the time been called upon to investigate the case. From all that he could gather by talking to the Maire, and the Juge de Paix, and the Doctor, and the brigadier de gendarmerie, never was a fact more satisfactorily esta-

blished than that the murder of Martin Prévost was committed by some one from without,—some one whose mere object was to rob the old man of his money, and who had successfully escaped all pursuit.

As to Prosper Morel,—beyond what had led to his arrest, namely, the fact of his having a short time previously vowed vengeance upon his master for an offence which was shown to have been condoned and forgotten,—beyond that one fact, nothing in all the evidence collected pointed at him ; and, on the contrary, the whole of that evidence had so thoroughly excluded any notion of his culpability, that his imprisonment was a subject of regret to every one ; for it was generally supposed that it had had a fatal effect upon the old Breton's mind and health.

The incident which had, at the time, struck every one as alone likely to afford a clue to the criminal, had remained wholly unfathomable. The footsteps, namely, which led from the house to the garden, and ceased on the edge of the little stream, or rather ditch, close to the Chôlet high road, had never been made to coincide with boot or shoe wearable by any individual connected far or near with old Prévost or his house.

“I know what I have thought sometimes since then,” said one day the brigadier de gendarmerie, in a moment of supreme confidence; “but one never likes to cast a suspicion on any one;—above all, when one belongs to the Executive authority!” And Monsieur Frédéri drew himself up majestically.

“Did you suspect any one in D——, then?” asked the Curé, with a shudder.

“At the time, no,” was the reply; “but since, I have often thought that——” he paused. “Well, Monsieur le Curé, to you I don’t mind confiding my secret thoughts. If I had been Monsieur le Juge d’Instruction, I would have had that sharper, Léon Duprez, arrested.” And as he uttered these last words he lowered his voice.

“Léon Duprez?” echoed the Curé, with a start of surprise; “why, what could possibly make you suspect him?”

“Nothing, Monsieur le Curé; I repeat it, at the time, nothing; but have you never reflected that he left D—— immediately after the crime, and we now know under what circumstances he left it, and what a pressing need he must have been under at

that identical moment for a few thousand francs ?”

The Curé stared at the gendarme in mute astonishment.

“Yes,” continued the latter ; “my suspicion is so strong, that if the scoundrel were not away in Australia, if he were anywhere within my reach, I would now do everything in my power to get him arrested, so persuaded do I feel that, in some way or other, he had to do with the murder of old Monsieur Prévost.”

This was a totally new light to the Curé, and only contributed to perplex him more and more ; and, strange to say, instead of delivering him from all preoccupation as far as the woodcutter was concerned, it only made those preoccupations more complicated and less avoidable. What did the Breton

mean when he raved about "the other?"
Who was that "other?"

Though on the day of his strange interview with Prosper Morel, up in the woods, the Curé had ended,—after the bûcheron had regained his senses,—by calming the old man's agitation, and inducing him to listen to him quietly enough, still he had not advanced one step in the direction of any practical discovery. He had talked to Prosper for nearly an hour, and could not avoid thinking he had done him good; but the principal sign of improvement on the woodcutter's part was afforded by silence.

When once Prosper had been brought to look upon the Curé as a friend, and to acknowledge him in the flesh as his spiritual pastor, a certain load appeared to be taken

off his mind,—a certain dread to be mitigated. By degrees, as the Curé spoke and advised, and tried to soothe and comfort him, Prosper seemed to undergo a species of physical relaxation; his nerves ceased their over-tension, he stretched his arms and legs as people do after long illness and fever, and closed his eyes frequently and as with a sensation of relief.

These signs induced the Curé, while Prosper was present, to incline towards the belief that the old man was merely a victim to temporary insanity, or simply hallucination brought on by the tragic events with which he had been indirectly connected, and kept up by the gloom of his solitary life. But when he reflected upon Prosper's conduct, and recurred to his manner, to his look, to the tone of his voice, an instinct

awoke that would not be hushed,—an instinct that for ever told him there was more in all this than madness.

All he had gained was, that the wretched old man had listened to him, and had seemingly comprehended what he had said. Naturally, after bringing the Breton to accept his interference, and to submit to his counsels, there was, according to the lights of a sincerely pious Catholic priest, but one course to which he could endeavour to lead him;—to confess. He could teach him no other lesson save that only one: “Repent, confess, and thy sins shall be forgiven thee;” and that lesson he taught him.

The woodcutter listened in silence, but he more than once muttered to himself, “Confess! confess!” and he shivered as with a fit of ague.

“And thy sins shall be forgiven thee,” slowly and impressively added the priest.

But further than that he did not get.

Unfortunately, in small places like D——, nothing can be kept secret, and a distorted account of the Curé's visit to old Prosper's abode began to circulate amongst the gossips. Whence did it come? Who knows? Perhaps from the brigadier—perhaps from old Lise, “Monsieur le Curé's Lise,” to whom, after fifteen years passed under the same roof, her master did now and then just hint that he was troubled or perplexed. However, circulate the story did, and with so many embellishments, that the old Breton was transformed into an object of popular curiosity, and, as the days were fine and beginning to lengthen, knots of mischievous boys would troop off into the

woods and organise expeditions to "La Chapelle à Prosper," as they termed it; and the old man's extraordinary demeanour, his "mummeries and antics," as they called them, came to be a grand subject of diversion for the godless crew.

But the behaviour of the bûcheron was altered now. Instead of stalking about and chanting Psalms and Litanies, as he had been used to do, he would sit for hours together, with closed eyes, his chin resting on his clasped hands, and his elbows on his knees. He appeared absorbed in meditation. He was perfectly harmless, and sought in no way to punish his youthful tormentors, but almost seemed to look upon them as a part of the penance he was doomed to undergo. When he believed himself most alone he would suddenly hear a mock-

ing voice calling him by name, and as he turned round, a curly pate, or a smudgy visage, would show itself from behind the tree-stems or the bushes, and grin and make faces at him. They popped out upon him on all sides, dogged his steps, hopped across his path, and when they had found that he opposed no resistance to their tricks, they, with all the cowardice of "little-boy" nature, set to work to torment him systematically. Nor was it only the very small imps who indulged in this occupation. Their example was soon followed by the lads of fifteen or sixteen, and to these were also too often added the lazy loiterers who, in small provincial towns, have nothing particular to do except lounge away their afternoons at the "café," reading the "Siècle."

The great amusement was to call upon the woodcutter to confess. First one, and then another, would jump out of the brush-wood, and cry out:

“Why don’t you go to confession, Prosper?”

“You had better confess!” would add a third.

“If you’ll only confess to me, Prosper, I’ll give you absolution at once,” would observe a fourth.

And the effect was invariably the same. The man listened silently, cast a haggard look around,—very much the look of a frightened animal,—and then rose, and with shambling gait went up to his blackened board behind the shed, and began to write upon it broken and half-illegible sentences in white chalk. Once established at this

work, nothing disturbed him more. Hours would elapse, and he would go on alternately rubbing out words already written, and writing fresh ones in their place.

Day after day people talked of the bûcheron's madness; and at market, and at the café, it was a common subject of discourse; but the Curé was more than ever perplexed, and uneasy in his mind.

"It is a very extraordinary case this of Prosper Morel's," said he one day to young Morville, whom he met accidentally walking towards the High Street of D——; "very extraordinary and perplexing."

"I see nothing in it either very extraordinary or very perplexing," replied Raoul calmly. "The old man's head was always a weak one; what has passed has fairly turned it,—as it well might,—and your

own sermon of the Fête des Morts has supplied the one particular image to which the diseased brain has clung ever since. Such cases are far more frequent than you fancy ; above all, with such races as those Bas-Bretons,—gloomy, and easily led towards fixed ideas.”

“Raoul,” said the Curé, after a few steps taken side by side in silence, “old Prosper is no more mad than you or I. That is my conviction.”

Young Morville expressed his entire dissent from the Curé’s opinion, and they again walked on together in silence till they reached the part of the street just opposite La Maison Prévost. “Good-bye, Raoul,” said the Curé, with a slight touch of sadness. “I am going in there. Good-bye ; I have seen but little of you since you came.

I hardly think you have come once to the Presbytère."

"If you knew what a state my father was in, you would, perhaps, excuse me," rejoined the young man. "I really do not know even now what decision to take. He will probably never recover, and my month's congé is nearly up."

"And then you must go back to Paris?" remarked the Curé. "Or have you any chance of lengthening your leave?"

"I fear not. I have only a week left. I wish, instead of Paris, I were going to Australia." The last words were uttered in a tone of great dejection.

"To Australia?" echoed the Curé, with a start. "Why Australia?"

"Only because it is so much farther off," said young Morville. But there was a

bitterness in the look with which he accompanied the words, and altogether an air about him that the Curé could not account for, and that he disliked.

They separated, and Monsieur le Curé, crossing over to La Maison Prévost, told Madame Jean, when she opened the door, that it was absolutely necessary he should see Monsieur Richard. "Of course he won't object to receiving you, but he is very nervous and weak to-day," was Madame Jean's reply, as she ushered the Curé into her master's room. Weak enough and nervous enough he looked, to be sure, as he rose from his fireside to greet the parish priest, and offer him the seat in the opposite corner.

"No, thank you," said the Curé. "I should faint from the heat. Your room is

an oven. You should open the window, Monsieur Richard; such a temperature is enough to take all the strength out of you."

"I have none left in me, alas!" rejoined Monsieur Richard in a whining voice. "I get worse and worse, and I believe I shall be forced to change the air, and try Cannes or Hyères for a few weeks. My cough is so troublesome, my breathing so bad, and I cannot sleep."

"Fine weather will do much, my good Monsieur Richard, and we shall soon be having that; but you must excuse me if I come to trouble you upon some very sad business, but where really you are the only person who can act. Touching old Prosper Morel——"

Monsieur Richard turned round towards the fire, and answered fractionally, "Mon

Dieu ! mon Dieu ! how cruel everybody is ! The poor old creature is mad, stark mad, and I will not have him molested with my consent. Do have him left alone. Do let him do what he likes ; he can't live long, and he hurts nobody."

"Monsieur Richard," continued the Curé, gravely—"Prosper is not mad ; that is my deliberate conviction, and he ought, at all events, to be examined by some medical man."

"Not mad, my dear Monsieur le Curé !" repeated Monsieur Richard, peevishly. "Why, his madness is notorious,—is the talk of the town. What would be the use of a doctor ?"

"The use of a doctor would be to define clearly what is the real mental condition of the man," retorted the Curé. "If he

is insane, he ought to be shut up and attended to ; if he is not——”

“Well, what then?” inquired Monsieur Richard, almost angrily. “What then?”

“Why, then,” rejoined the Curé, slowly, “the case ought to be looked into in another way. Prosper is perfectly calm. All his vehemence has subsided, but he is under the impression of some horrible deed, and he persistently, and day after day, proclaims himself a murderer.” Monsieur Richard shrugged his shoulders, and threw two more logs on the fire. “Prosper’s behaviour is now such as, in my mind, to call for some notice from you, Monsieur Richard, as the nearest relative of the murdered man. He passes his days and nights in writing upon the board behind his strange abode up yonder,

the confession of his guilt. Fifty times over you will see the words, 'Prosper did it,' written in large characters; and 'God be merciful to Prosper, the murderer!'"

"And upon such evident marks of insanity as those, you would persecute a poor wretch of this kind?" retorted Richard Prévost.

"That is not all," urged the Curé. "He invariably alludes to some one else,—says he was not alone,—says there was another person mixed up with him in the crime."

"Monsieur le Curé," said Richard Prévost, drawing himself closer into the fire, "all the circumstances of my poor uncle's death were minutely investigated at the time, and if anything was proved, it was Prosper Morel's innocence; and I will not have the poor old fellow's last days tortured

with my consent. That the murderer of my uncle escaped is clear. One day, perhaps, he may be discovered,—people say murderers always are,—but I should think it a positive crime to re-institute fresh proceedings now, upon no surer a basis than the ravings of a wretched idiot who has already lost his reason through our first ill-founded suspicions.”

The Curé argued and argued, but could make no way whatever against Monsieur Richard.

“So you will not take any further proceedings in this matter?” said the priest, when he rose to go.

“None whatever,” answered Richard Prévost. “There has been misery enough. Let poor old Prosper be left in peace. He won’t live long, probably.”

As the Curé was passing out of the room, he turned round with his hand still upon the door; "Remember my words, Monsieur Richard," he added gravely, "Prosper Morel is not mad."

CHAPTER XVIII.

ST. MARK'S DAY.

ONE thing was clear to every one, and that was, the alteration that had taken place in young Morville. He had used to be so gay and joyous, so *en train*, as the French say, so up to everything! and now he was absorbed and absent, looked exceedingly ill, and moved about as though oppressed by some overwhelming care. Far from seeking the society of any of the people in D——, he apparently avoided all society; for, as the Curé had truly remarked, he did not go

near him, who had been from early youth his best and surest friend, and he neglected the family at the Château, where he had hitherto had a second home.

Monsieur de Vérancour did not spare his observations upon Raoul's conduct, and was for ever commenting upon it in a way that terribly alarmed and pained Vévette. "It is the same with all those young fellows," the Vicomte would say; "the very moment they get up to Paris it's all over. They tumble into some mischief or other,—mostly some infamous woman at the bottom of it all, some Dame aux Camélias, or some drôlesse of the demi-monde, which is even worse; and then come the string of embarrassments and misfortunes, play, debts, and God knows what all. They borrow what they can't pay, and they know they can't;

but that's no matter; they go on all the same, and hope some miracle will be performed in their favour; and the end of it all is, the ruin of papa and mamma and the whole family, who have to pay for the young gentleman's misdeeds. But when there is neither papa nor mamma nor family, the end is another one,—disgrace, or suicide, or both; mighty lucky when it isn't dishonour, or the Bagne for forgery: but it's always the same thing, and if ever I saw any one who bore all the marks of having got into a mess, it is Raoul."

And then the Vicomte usually wound up by some bitter remarks upon the people of the present day who go themselves, or send their sons, up to Paris to make money, and said how infinitely preferable was the quiet life and honest mediocrity of the province,

where your ancestors had lived and died before you! "It might be dull," opined the Vicomte self-righteously; "it might be humdrum, but it was honourable, and according to the traditions of old French ways and customs."

Monsieur de Vérancour never seemed to think it otherwise than "highly honourable" to contemplate the sale of his child to a man she despised; and such bargains formed part of what he thought the superior morality of provincial life.

Now, poor Vévette was breaking her heart all this while, and suffering martyrdom in silence. What she heard whispered about her, and what her father said aloud, would have been nothing had her own heart not failed her. But her own heart had told her, long before others spoke, that some-

thing was wrong, very wrong, with Raoul. A girl, brought up as girls are in France, may sometimes love quickly, yet be very long before she knows that she loves. The everyday life of respectable families is singularly flat and monotonous, and helps to lead a girl on from the cradle to the grave in ignorance of what lies hidden in her soul. But if once the accident happen, if once the calm be broken,—beware !

And thus it had been with Vévette ; she had been true to her teachers so long as she could be so, so long as she lived their life instead of her own ; but as soon as the measure of her suffering taught her the measure of her love, as soon as she knew beyond all doubt that she loved Raoul better than everything else upon earth, and that for his loss Paradise itself would not com-

pensate, then the aspects and the aims and purposes of her life changed, and she was another than the self she had hitherto been. Had any one about her really cared to discover what was passing in the poor child's physical and mental condition, the perturbation would have been easily seen. She had grown miserably thin from anxiety and sleeplessness, but her cheek had a flush and her eye had a brilliancy that misled those uninterested in her happiness. The excitement within threw its fever-mantle round her, and they took it for bloom.

“How wonderfully well your sister looks,” said the Vicomte to Félicie; “she is growing extremely handsome. I never saw her look so well, and she is so lively.” “Yes,” the latter would answer, “she is even too lively; she is restless and brusque;

she was not used to be so, but I suppose it is one of the changes girls sometimes go through. It is very lucky she is not called upon to make a great sacrifice for others,—to immolate herself; for I do not think she would be equal to it. Vévette is becoming self-willed; indeed, almost wilful.” And so saying, Mademoiselle Félicie would sigh, and look full of compunction for her sister’s sins.

On the 25th of April there was a kind of fête at D——. It was the feast of St. Marc, which had been time out of mind kept as a holiday in that locality, and at which it was customary that every one in the neighbourhood should be present. The amusements of the fête were all grouped together in the fields that lay between D—— and the village of St. Philbert;

and upon a piece of land visible from the terrace of the Château, and called the Pré St. Marc, were to be found all the usual attractions of such popular gatherings as these. There were the menageries, and the giants and dwarfs, and learned dogs and pigs and birds, and magicians, and Dutch toupies, and gingerbread-stalls; and there, also, was the space set aside for dancing, under the wide-spreading boughs of two enormous chestnut-trees. When night came, all this was to be illuminated with coloured lamps, but the festivities of the night were left chiefly to the enjoyment of the lower orders, or to individuals of the masculine sex alone among their betters. The fashionable hour for attending the fête was late in the afternoon, from four to six or half-past,—what determined provincials still called, before

supper. At that hour all the notables were sure to be found congregating together round the roots of the chestnut-trees, and either looking on at the dancers or taking part in the dance; for it was the custom that upon this occasion there should be a perfect confusion of ranks.

Monsieur le Maire and his spouse, and the Juge de Paix, and the notary, and all the other dignitaries of D——, had already appeared upon the Pré St. Marc, when the Vicomte was seen approaching with his two daughters and Monsieur le Curé, and followed by Richard Prévost and the doctor, who had been expressing his satisfaction at the improvement in Monsieur Richard's health. Besides these, there were several visitors from châteaux in the environs; and one gossip,—but then that

was that mischievous woman Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, the wife of the Juge de Paix,—declared she had seen Monsieur de Champmorin lounging about.

However that may be, Félicie did assuredly look pretty and graceful enough to have been worth any suitor's while to woo. As to Vévette, her beauty took people by surprise, for they were not used to think anything of her, as the common phrase runs, and it was strange to be positively dazzled by what you have never been taught to regard as a light.

The sisters were dressed nearly alike, excepting only that the elder wore blue, and the younger pink ribbons. Both had on white dresses and straw hats; and whilst the soft colours of her blue streamers harmonised so delightfully with Félicie's

delicate, even complexion, and light, wavy, chestnut hair, that you could not help seeing she had studied her effects, the rosy hue of Vévette's trimmings, that would have been so set off by her thick flaxen tresses, paled under the damask flush of her burning cheek and the scarlet of her unquiet lip.

It was a general remark how much better poor Monsieur Richard looked, and everybody seemed glad thereof; for, excepting the purchase of the little carriage from Tours, Richard Prévost had given no sign of enjoying his wealth, and his weak health was such an obstacle to his ever thoroughly enjoying it, that his neighbours were pleased with him, and patronised him, and morally patted him on the back.

When the usual observations on the weather, and the fact of this being the very finest St. Marc ever remembered, were at an end, one of the first subjects of general conversation was the insanity of old Prosper.

“I really am tired to death of hearing that poor unfortunate old creature talked of incessantly,” said Félicie. “It is precisely what is so odious in provincial life; one never hears the last of anything, however trivial or unimportant it may happen to be.” This remark had been made to Monsieur le Curé and Richard Prévost, who were both standing beside Mademoiselle de Vérancour when she spoke. But it was also heard by Monsieur le Maire, who by no means agreed in this system of disparaging the province.

“It is possible, mademoiselle,” said he,

“that in a great centre like Paris, crime itself may pass unnoticed, but I am old-fashioned enough to prefer provincial ways, and not to quarrel with what after all only proves an extreme susceptibility to the state of public morality;” and then he, too, launched out into a tirade about the old French ways and customs, and tradition, and drew from it all the plain inference that crime was the daily bread of the Parisians.

“Crime! my dear sir,” retorted Félicie, with that peculiar mixture of contempt and condescension she sometimes assumed, “but there is no question of crime in all this; it is a question only of insanity, and the poor old man up yonder will be probably worried to death by the gossips of D——.”

“I assure you, mademoiselle,” persisted the Maire, “it is a most extraordinary case, if all that is reported be true.”

The Curé and Richard Prévost had left the little group to speak to some fresh arrivals from St. Philbert, and the Vicomte, who had rejoined his daughters, now took part in the conversation. “It really does seem to me,” said he, “that what it is the fashion now to call the public, does, as usual, meddle most impertinently in what does not concern it. Surely as long as the one person who is alone entitled to interfere remains silent, no one else has any right to raise his voice. If Monsieur Richard is convinced of that miserable old man’s innocence, whose business can it possibly be to accuse or suspect him?” But the Maire was inclined to support the

cause of what he called public justice, and he was beginning to argue the point with the Vicomte, when the band charged with the musical department of the fête plunged with such diabolical energy into a contre-danse, that no more talk was just then practicable.

Monsieur le Maire requested the honour of Mademoiselle Félicie's hand, whilst—the Mairesse being infirm and unable to dance—Monsieur de Vérancour performed vis-à-vis to them with a very portly and consequential personage, Madame Valentin, the grocer's wife, out and out the richest bourgeoisie in D——, and reputed to entertain the most advanced opinions both in religion and politics. It had even been whispered that Madame Valentin was encouraging her husband to lend money to

a certain lawyer of Republican tendencies, who dreamed of setting up a liberal newspaper, to be called "Le Drapeau du Département," with a view to waging war upon the Préfet's pet organ. However, notwithstanding her political bias, the epicier's spouse seemed well pleased with her cavalier, for she laughed with all her teeth, which were fine, as she ducked down through the chaîne anglaise, and came back with evident glee to her partner after an en-avant-deux.

Meanwhile our friend Madame Jean had been led forth among the side couples by the brigadier, who was observed invariably to encircle her waist with his arm and perform a pirouette à la militaire with her, each time that the figure of the quadrille placed him face to face with his partner.

"She won't marry him any more for all that," whispered the lanky over-grown son of the Juge de Paix to Mère Jubine's Louison, with whom he was dancing.

But Louison was busy admiring Monsieur Richard.

Yes! there was some one for whom Richard Prévost was not "poor Monsieur Richard;" some one for whom he was a grand gentleman, and the type of all elegance and fashion!

As we have said, Richard Prévost was not ill-looking; he appeared to be weakly,—that was all,—and was pre-eminently what the Provençal terms "not much of a man;" but for the old washerwoman's daughter, herself the very handsomest girl of her class in D——, this very delicacy was refinement; and Monsieur Richard.

with his blond hair elaborately curled by the coiffeur, and his glossy whiskers, his blue cravat, and pale lilac kid gloves, his superb watch-chain, and with clouds of perfume over all, was the very finest gentleman she had ever seen, or would ever have a chance of seeing. And so Mère Jubine's Louison was all eyes for Monsieur Richard, and paid no attention to what the pale-faced lanky son of the Juge de Paix was saying to her about Madame Jean and her military lover.

Just before the contre-danse had begun, Raoul de Morville had passed close to the group where the Vicomte and his daughters were standing. Greetings had been exchanged, and as Mousieur le Maire carried off Félicie as his partner, Vévette had turned round as if with a sudden impulse:—

“Have you forsworn dancing, Raoul?” she asked, trying to smile very gaily. “We used always to dance together at the St. Marc when we were children.”

“Shall we do so now?” was the answer; and Raoul went towards the dancers with Vévette on his arm.

While they danced together, they never spoke once, but once their hands met; hers lingered in his, and with that touch all words were made superfluous.

When the contre-danse was over, they were for a few minutes separated from the crowd. “Why have you never been near us?” inquired Vévette in a low tone. “Have you forgotten us?”

“Forgotten you, Vévette!” The way in which the words were uttered forced her to look at Raoul, and when their eyes had

met she had no further need to be reassured.

“Then, Raoul,” she added, taking courage, “what is the reason you keep away? What has happened?”

“Oh, Vévette,” he rejoined, with an accent of what seemed almost like despair, “so much has happened. Little enough, perhaps, for others, but for me everything;” and then he paused, while she looked and listened in breathless anxiety. “Suppose,” he continued, “that all my hopes were at an end; that I could never look forward to our marriage. What would remain to me if I consented to live on, but to go away as far as I possibly could;—to put the seas between us? If all possible idea of your one day being mine had to be given up, my duty, however hard, would be

to avoid you, and my last chance would be to fly to the end of the world—to New Zealand or Australia.”

“No, Raoul, not that,” was the rejoinder, but given in a voice he had never heard come from those lips before.

“Alas! and why not?” he asked mournfully.

“Because I should die if you did.” They looked for a second steadfastly at each other; but the *Vévette* who stood before Raoul now he had never known. All colour had flown from her lips and cheek, and the flame in her eyes had darkened, as it were; the truth had compelled her; the shy convent-bred girl was gone; and in her place was the passionate woman, really loving unto death.

It was not in masculine nature not for

one instant to be enraptured at the avowal thus desperately made, and for one instant Raoul's whole countenance glowed with the glory of being loved. "Then, my own," he resumed fondly, "you must know what has happened, you must know all; you alone must decide what shall be our future. Come what will, in three days I must be in Paris, but——"

"In Paris, in three days?" gasped Vévette.

"That must be, darling," he replied soothingly; "but that is a minor evil. I will tell you the cause of all my misery, and I swear to abide by your decision. Don't look so terrified, love; listen to me; I have——" But all further conversation was cut short by Monsieur le Maire, who strutted up to solicit the honour of Mademoiselle Vévette's hand.

When the quadrille was over, the eternal topic of old Prosper Morel was recurred to, for the benefit of a visitor at a neighbouring château to whom the entire story was new. "Do you know, Monsieur le Vicomte," urged Monsieur le Maire, harking back to his old argument of "public justice,"—"Do you know that what Joseph le Vaillant tells is passing strange all the same?"

"Oh! so you've been inspecting poor old Prosper, have you?" asked Monsieur de Vêrancour, with a supercilious glance at the Juge de Paix's son.

"I went up there yesterday," replied the lanky youth.

"Well, and what did you see that was so wonderful?"

"Oh, only Prosper's drawings, and the

same words over and over. 'Prosper did it,' and then the date, '14th of October.' His new mania is to draw a kind of figure of a guillotine with three great capital letters under it, a P, an M, and an R. Always these three same; and sometimes they stand under a guillotine, sometimes flames are pictured under them: but always these three letters are repeated; and over the guillotine he mostly writes, 'Expiation!' And then he sits down before the drawing and looks at it till your flesh creeps as you look at him. Is not that a queer thing, Monsieur le Vicomte?"

"An M, that's Morel," said Monsieur de Vérancour, "and P, that's Prosper; but what's R for?"

"Well, perhaps Retribution!" opined the Juge de Paix.

“ I will go up in a day or two and see to all this myself,” said Monsieur le Maire. “ I can’t go to-morrow, but I will positively go the day after.”

The Vicomte shrugged his shoulders.

“ Poor devil ! ” said he, “ they’ll torture him to death.”

“ I incline to think the Maire is quite right,” observed the Curé gravely. “ I can’t help believing there is more in all this than you fancy.”

CHAPTER XIX.

PROSPER'S ARREST.

UPON the face of it, was there enough to account for Raoul de Morville's sore depression of spirits? That question touches the individual appreciation of suffering, which is different in each human being. What to one is but a feather, may to another be a weight beneath which he is crushed. If young Morville's past life, and the hopes upon which his whole heart had centred, be taken into consideration, it

is certain that he had good cause to feel exceedingly unhappy.

If the circumstances wherewith love is surrounded in different countries be well examined, it will be seen that nothing can be more various than the aspects of the passion which many people falsely believe to be the same everywhere.

If a man without fortune love a girl without a farthing, in England, need he despair? No! for he has resources open to him: he can work and win her, he can emigrate to one of the many lands where English is spoken, and by dint of toil, time, and endurance, it is more than probable he may end by gaining enough to enable him to unite himself to her without whom life seems to him worthless. At all events he has society and public opinion on his

side. For his energy and for her constancy everybody will think higher of the couple who wish to marry for love.

But not so in France. In the first place, the man who, without money, wishes to gain it in order to marry the woman he has chosen, has a marvellously small choice of means whereby to achieve his aim. If he has financial aptitudes, no scruples, and great luck, he may by some stroke on the bourse, in which he has risked honour,—in case of failure,—achieve fortune; but the man capable of that is mostly a man incapable of the devotion we suppose him setting out to serve. For a chivalrous minded man,—and the man who resolves to win the girl he loves is that,—it is hard to see any resource in France. How he is to achieve independence in a country

where every single field for activity, large or small, is railed in and set aside, and where nothing is open to individual energy, it is hard to see; but what is worse is, that he has society, and the opinion of all the men and women in it, against him. He must do whatever he does without ever allowing his motive to be guessed, or he is lost. His friends would set him down for a fool, and the rest of the world for something near akin to a perturbator of general morality.

All that esteem, all that sympathetic encouragement which are so necessary to the man who has to fight a hard fight, are denied in France to the man who dreams of marrying for love. He becomes a species of pariah, whom it is unsafe to let inside your doors. If he, being without money,

chose to love a girl who has plenty, that is quite another thing. If he wins her, he will be applauded because the love can be denied. If a very rich man, on the other hand, be resolved to marry a woman who is poor, that again will be tolerated ;— though not viewed so favourably as the preceding case, because it gives doubly a bad example : first, to rich sons of families who, independently of their parents, may take to marrying penniless wives ; and next, to dowerless girls, who may nourish illusions and become dangerous to the peace of respectable families.

No ! The fitness of things lies in the union of money with money. That is according to rule. What is so also, is the union of high birth with wealth. In this arrangement also there is a fitness pleasant

to contemplate, for there is an exchange of valuables. Something is sold and something bought, and it is altogether a business transaction,—in which a Frenchman tells you, you find “a guarantee!”

But in a marriage of poverty with poverty there is no “guarantee,” and the love which induces it is only an “aggravating circumstance.”

Now, Raoul's position was in this respect the worst of all possible positions. He had conceived the mad idea of winning by his own exertions the hand of a girl who was as poor as himself. He had no excuse, for he had been brought up with Félicie and Vévette, and knew their pecuniary situation as well as he knew his own. Of course, if Mademoiselle Geneviève de Vêrancour shared his absurd notions, it was wholly and

entirely his fault ; for unless he had forced them upon her, how should a well-born girl, educated in a convent too ! ever entertain any idea so utterly wrong as that of marrying for love ? All the blame would be Raoul's ; and had he any, the remotest chance, of earning for himself the even relative independence that would enable him to aspire to the hand of his beloved ?

Perhaps there had been a time, not far off, when he had thought that his hopes might be realised ; but what were his present prospects ? He had twelve hundred francs a year for working hard in a public office for eight hours a day ! Forty-eight pounds per annum would not go far to maintain a wife, let alone children. And what were his other chances ? Perhaps promotion in six or eight years, and a salary of seventy-

five, or it might be a hundred pounds yearly ;—for he had no “protection.”

All this was disheartening enough, and Raoul was disheartened. He loved Vévette with his whole heart and soul, and could see nothing in life worth having if she failed him. But he sickened at the notion of waiting for long years. He wanted Vévette to be his now ; now, while he and she were young, and the first bloom was on their love. More even than the cheerlessness of his prospects he felt the hardness of being obliged to hide his one object in life as though it were a crime. As a man who lives for a passion unconnected with ambition or interest, Raoul was a man out of all communion with his fellow-countrymen ; and if you examine impartially his position, his nature, and his probable chances, you

will perhaps see that he had some cause for apparent despair.

In three days he was to leave D——. When to return, and with what hopes? As he thought of this and this only, it is no wonder that he paid but little attention to the events which in D—— were marching on apace.

The day following the St. Marc, Monsieur le Maire could not, as he said, go and visit the old bûcheron, but the day after he did so, and his visit had a remarkable result. Monsieur le Maire was an early riser, and the clocks had not yet struck eight when he turned into the narrow path which, through the brushwood and brambles, led to the spot where Prosper Morel had erected his present abode. The dew was still heavy on the ground, and the damp under foot and over

head made the place remarkably cheerless, apart from the gloom which was cast around it by its strange occupant.

When Monsieur le Maire reached the spot on which stood the shed called *La Chapelle à Prosper*, there was no sign of any inhabitant, no trace of the whereabouts of a living man. The Maire went straight up to the open side of the shed, and examined minutely all the ornaments and accessories of the chapel, and when he had done that, he, with the inquisitiveness of a civil functionary which the *Curé* had not, proceeded to an investigation of the other part of the rude dwelling. It had seemingly neither door nor window, but on raising the clumsy bit of hurdle-fence with which the opening was closed, you looked into a sort of den or hole in which it was clear that the wood-

cutter slept. In one corner was a heap of straw, hay, feather, and fern, all mixed up together, and covered over with a piece of coarse brown blanket very much torn. It was more like the lair of a beast than the resting-place of a man, but it was evidently the old man's bed.

The Maire indulged in a protracted examination of the inside of the establishment, but found nothing to satisfy his curiosity. Of the occupant there was no sign. Leaving the apparent bed-chamber of the bûcheron, and closing it up again with the hurdle, the visitor passed to the outside of the shed and proceeded to study the hieroglyphics of the boarding at the back of it. Yes, truly enough, there they were ;—the figures and images and signs of which so much had been told ! There were

the guillotines, and flames, and verses from the Psalms, and over and over repeated, the words: "Prosper did it," and "God be merciful to the murderer!" And there stood again and again the letters P and M under the guillotine, over the flames; but of no other letter was there any trace; whether the letter R meant Retribution, as the Juge de Paix suggested, or not, was all one; for there was no letter R to be seen anywhere. To this Monsieur le Maire attached very little importance. It only made him form a rather low estimate of the accuracy of the Juge de Paix's lanky, overgrown boy, who in that respect simply shared in the mind of Monsieur le Maire the disfavour attaching to boys in general, who were all in his opinion more or less stupid and inaccurate.

At last the Maire discovered Prosper Morel. But what was he doing?

Turning round the corner behind the part of the shed devoted to the chapel, the visitor came upon what looked at first like a heap of old clothes, but what turned out to be the Breton cowering down with hands and knees upon the ground, and apparently groping for something hidden upon, or under the earth. At sight of the intruder Prosper looked up, and turning round seated himself deliberately with his back to the shed and his two hands clasped across his knees. He neither looked angry nor surprised, but gazed intently at the Maire.

“You lead a solitary life out here,” began the dignitary.

“No!” answered the Breton, “my life is peopled. I am never alone.”

“Who is with you?” asked the Maire, determined to humour the old man.

“Who is with me?” he echoed. “The past, the past! I’m full of the past.”

“Prosper,” continued his interlocutor, “I have not come here to do you any harm, but to judge for myself of the strange reports that you encourage by your own conduct. Look at me, Prosper Morel, and try to tell me the real truth. What reason have you for saying the wild things you say? What interest have you in leading the whole town down there to believe that you have committed an awful crime?” While the Maire was speaking, Prosper’s countenance underwent no change. All its life was as usual concentrated in the eyes, and these were fixed upon the speaker as though they would absorb his every feature.

Slowly he rose, and his huge uncouth figure leaning against the wall, he put forth his arm and fastened his bony fingers upon the Maire's wrist.

“What reason?” he exclaimed; “what interest? What; can't you understand it? My soul! my soul! I want to save that. But that is how you are, you bourgeois, all of you! You go to church, but you don't believe; and you don't care for truth, God's truth, the eternal truth, by which we are saved or damned. You will take the life of an innocent creature, because you think he seems guilty, and you take no trouble to see whether he is so or not, and when real guilt—the very truth of crime—is brought before you, you won't recognise it, because it is not discovered by the agents of the law. Oh! Monsieur le Maire, Monsieur le

Maire," went on the bûcheron with desperate earnestness, "we have souls; we really have souls, and we can save them."

"But, my good man," objected the other, now seriously inclined to believe in Prosper's insanity, "do you mean then, seriously, to declare that you murdered Martin Prévost?"

"This hand did the deed," replied the woodcutter, holding up his right hand and spreading its five fingers out to their utmost directly in the face of the Maire, who stepped back a pace or two. "Yes!" resumed the Breton, "this hand, but only this hand; not mind or will; only the hand!"

"And you hope for forgiveness by accusing yourself?" suggested his visitor.

"Hope! I am sure of it. I have con-

fessed. I confess every day. Come with me!" and before he could resist it, the Maire found himself dragged before the boarding, on which Prosper pointed out to him his gloomy writings. "There," he said, "and there, and there! I hide nothing, I give all I have to purchase back my soul, and when the Lord has forgiven me, expiation will come. I wait, I wait! *De profundis clamavi ad te, Domine!*" And he crossed his hands on his breast and looked upwards fervently.

The Maire was now all but fully convinced of Prosper's insanity; and the latter caught at his conviction by some intuitive sense. "Ah!" he exclaimed, with sudden animation; "that is so like you all. You don't believe what you don't know. Take care, Monsieur le Maire; take care! You

don't believe a man has a soul ; you don't believe he ought to give his life to save it. You wouldn't save yours with your life, Monsieur le Maire. Saint Thomas ! Saint Thomas ! they must touch, ere they believe. Well then, look here ! ”

Seizing hold of the Maire's arm he led him back to the spot where he had himself been discovered cowering down upon the ground. He went down upon both knees, displaced a few loose stones, took up with his nails a square sod of turf, cleared away some mould, and brought to view a small wooden box, the lid of which he opened without taking the box from its resting-place. “ There,” he cried, “ what do you see now ?—golden Napoleons, and bank-notes, and papers, and a purse ! There is all that was taken out of Monsieur's strong

box when he was dead. There it lies ;—all that you never could find ; all that for which you were so certain he was killed, there it lies ! Now you believe because now you understand. Oh ! you wise, wise men ! And you take to yourselves the right to punish and absolve ! Help me to save my soul, Monsieur le Maire, help me to save my soul ! For now you know I am the murderer of my master.”

The Maire was convinced.

* * * * *

That same day, the 27th of April, Prosper Morel was arrested by the brigadier de gendarmerie and his assistants in virtue of a proper warrant, and lodged provisionally in the gaol at D——. He offered no resistance. On the contrary, a curious kind of elation seemed to inspire him, and he

walked with a firm step between his captors, into the town of D——, a crucifix clasped with both hands upon his breast, and chanting as he went, in a loud voice, the Litanies for the Dead.

CHAPTER XX.

THE DOUBLE ARREST.

WHATEVER might have been the effect created at the time by old Martin Prévost's death, it was immeasurably surpassed by that which the arrest of the bûcheron produced. There was no end now to the conjectures and speculations; no saying what might not be revealed; no limit to the excitement of the townspeople of D——.

It was scarcely past noon when the Breton was brought a prisoner into the town, and before supper-time every man and

woman knew of every detail connected with his arrest,—or at all events talked as if they were thoroughly conversant with them. So great was the agitation of the little place, and so delighted was the little population at having such an occurrence wherewith to occupy itself, that long-standing feuds were healed in the common emotion, that Madame Joséphine le Vaillant condescended to exchange ideas with Madame Valentin, and that Céleste from the Château, and Madelon from the Mairie, fraternised with Madame Jean;—or rather tried to do so, for that important personage felt her importance doubled, and was less accessible than usual. Madame Jean's importance was doubled, for she held to the mystery by both ends. She was in a manner a co-proprietress of the criminal,—if cri-

minal he was, of which there was no inconsiderable doubt ;—while over the executive authority as represented in the person of la gendarmerie itself, who would gainsay her sovereign influence ?

There was a conviction in the public mind that Madame Jean really did know everything, and accordingly Madame Jean was paid court to instantly, as those are who have suddenly been invested with some unusual distinction or power. Besides, Monsieur le Maire was observed to go three times in the course of that eventful day to la Maison Prévost, and at his last visit, which was late in the day, he was accompanied by the brigadier.

But the public mind of D—— had had time, even in the space of a few hours, to become divided upon the question of Prosper

Morel's insanity. That Prosper had had to do with the murder of Martin Prévost could no longer be a matter of doubt ; but that he was the actual murderer, and, above all, that he was the only one who had committed the crime,—this became quickly the cause of the liveliest disputes. Indeed, this it was which made up the quarrel between the rich grocer's widow and Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, who both happened to be of the same opinion. These ladies opined that some person or persons yet undiscovered had really done the deed, and had, for some reason which would later be found out, been obliged to make an accomplice of old Prosper, whose weak intellect had been fairly upset by the horrible drama in which he had been mixed up. The doctor at D—— was of their way of thinking also,

for after having spent an hour with the Breton on the day of his committal to gaol, he confided to the Juge de Paix that, according to his belief, the old man was not altogether of sound mind. "There is an evident mixture of fact and imagination in all he says," had been the doctor's remark. "Up to a certain point he is as clear and precise as possible, and unmistakably sane; but past that point, he as unmistakably wanders, and either he is ignorant or he won't tell what he knows. I incline to believe him ignorant."

However, Dr. Javal had been telegraphed to from Chôlet, and it remained to be seen what that irreverential young practitioner's opinion would be. Meanwhile, an immense deal had already come out, and the craving public mind had devoured one

or two hard facts,—facts not to be controverted.

For instance, in the box dug up under Prosper's own directions were found a pair of new shoes, of a small size for a man, but answering to the impression left upon the minds of all who had assisted at the original "instruction" in October, by the foot-marks traced in the garden. Of course, in so grave a matter a mere impression left upon men's memories was scarcely a thing to rest an inference upon. Still, there were the shoes, too small for any one connected with the Prévost household; and they bore marks of having probably been worn but once. The heels were scarcely soiled, whilst the fore part of the sole was still clogged with a crust of dry mud out of which a few blades of dry grass were extracted.

Now, as to the money ! There was found, in five small parcels,—two only in rouleaux,—the sum of 5,000 francs in gold ; corresponding to what Monsieur Richard had found noted down on a paper in his uncle's strong box. In a small leathern pocket-book, or portfolio, were also found a number of bank-notes wrapped up in a piece of paper. But on this paper were written the following figures :—

“ 20	100	fr. notes.
12	500	do.
2	1000	do.
Total, 10,000 frs.”		

Now, when the notes were counted up they made a total of only 8,000, instead of 10,000. The two of 1,000 francs each were missing.

It became therefore evident that whoever the criminals really were, they had robbed

their victim to a certain extent, though undoubtedly an insignificant one, considering the far larger sum they had had at their disposal, and had left untouched. Having taken this much, why had they taken no more? If dishonest at all, why so moderate?

When the fact, however, of the missing notes was brought home to Prosper, the old man's demeanour changed altogether. Instead of the strange half-dreamy, half-ecstatic manner he had assumed from the first, he grew vehement, and all but furious. At the bare suspicion that he had robbed the murdered man, his indignation burst violently forth, and he stalked up and down the room where he had been brought for the first preliminary examination, alternately uttering incoherent phrases of bitter anger,

or relapsing into a dogged silence, during which he contented himself with glowering at the mayor, and gnashing his teeth.

“One thing is easy to see,” whispered the brigadier, who was present,—apparently for the protection of Monsieur le Maire,—“and that is, that if he were enraged, there’s nothing he would stop at.”

But the Breton was unmanageable, and sullenly retreating into a corner, declared he would not open his mouth again till the Curé, who had been sent for at his desire, should have arrived. When the Curé did come, the old man rose, shoved aside the gendarme with one sweep of his long lean arm, and, walking straight up to the priest, went down on both knees before him, and said, in a tone at once earnest and submissive :

“ I have confessed, father ! I have confessed ! I have lightened my soul of its load ; I have done what you ordered me to do ; but tell me I can save my soul ; tell me the punishment will not be eternal ; tell me I shall be forgiven ; tell me that, mon père ; tell me that ! ”

“ My poor friend ! ” said the Curé, with the utmost compassion in his tone, and laying his hand upon the bûcheron’s head ; “ so surely as you confess your transgressions, and repent of them with all your heart, so surely will you be forgiven. God’s mercy is infinite ; but you must confess all your sins ;—you must withhold nothing.”

“ I have told all ! ” exclaimed the Breton, suddenly springing to his feet, and with a glance of rekindling indignation ; “ but am

I not to tell the crimes of others, too? Are others to go unpunished?"

The manner of the man while saying this was so singular, there was such a revengeful air about him, that, coupled with the very unsafe condition of his intellect, the Curé thought he foresaw a danger, and determined to guard against it as best he could. "Prosper Morel," said he sternly, "the confession of your misdeeds is what will save your soul. The misdeeds of others lie between God and them. Beware of the spirit of revenge, my son! it will stand between you and atonement even to the Day of Judgment. You will expiate nothing by confessing other people's sins. You must repent of your own."

The brigadier fairly shrugged his shoulders with impatience on hearing this, and clanked

his big sabre on the ground ; and the Maire came up to the Curé cautiously, and putting his mouth close to the latter's ear, he whispered, " But if we could get him to reveal ; if we could get him to put us on the trace of——"

The priest, who was a powerful man, literally whisked the Maire, who was a small, pudgy one, into the embrasure of the window ; and, standing with his back turned to Prosper, so that the arrested man should not overhear him, he said, quite lowly, " The man is not safe ; once set him on revealing, and God only knows what he will imagine ! He is as likely as not to ' reveal ' you as his accomplice."—The Maire started back with horror.—" Yes ! every bit as likely as not. The man is not altogether sane, though he will probably tell

the entire truth about himself; but don't trust him with the lives and reputations of others. There is no saying to whom he owes a grudge, or what mischief might be done. Keep him to what touches himself only."

The civil functionary obeyed, though reluctantly, for he did not relish being baulked of a revelation or two.

"Now, Prosper," recommenced the Curé, "tell the truth about these missing notes. Calm yourself; subdue your anger; and now tell us how comes it that these two 1000-franc notes are gone?"

"I will only speak if my words are credited," rejoined the Breton, sullenly.

"Speak to me, Prosper, and I will believe you," continued the Curé.

"Well, then, mon père, by my hopes of

salvation, I know nothing of the money in the box. I saw it put in,—the gold and the leathern portfolio,—but as it was when put in, so it has remained ever since.”

“But,” objected the Curé, “you see these notes were wrapped up in a sheet of paper that was sealed, and the seal has been broken. You see these figures, written on the paper; they mark the sum of 10,000 francs, and specify two 1000-franc notes. These are gone.”

“Monsieur le Curé,” answered Prosper, “if my own soul had not been sleepless within me and tortured me, needed I to proclaim my guilt? Was not my innocence accredited? Have I not come freely, joyfully, into the enemy’s toils? Have I not come here to pay for the salvation of my immortal soul with my mortal body? This

hand,—this hand”—and he held his hand aloft—“committed a murder; but of any theft I know nothing. That box has never been touched since I carried it away after the murder, till this morning when I showed it to Monsieur le Maire.”

The Curé looked steadfastly at the prisoner, who never quailed before his gaze.

“Mon père,” at last added Prosper, “you must believe what I say, for you believe in what the Gospel teaches; you know that we have souls, and that we can save them;—they don’t!” and he waved his arm over all the other spectators of the scene. “They believe not. Mon père, tell them I speak the truth, for I am trying hard to save my soul.”

The Curé turned to the Maire, and with

great gravity said, "I do believe the man speaks the truth."

"But, then, the notes?" retorted the irritated Maire; "and the broken seal?"

"Time and the progress of the 'instruction' will throw light upon the whole," rejoined the Curé; "but I must believe Prosper Morel's words, and I do so."

At all events, nothing more was to be made of the Breton; and before the day closed a new and quite unforeseen direction was given to the current of the public thought in D——. Raoul de Morville was arrested for having been implicated in the murder of Martin Prévost, just as he was stepping into the diligence which was to convey him to the railway station, where he was to take the night train to Paris.

CHAPTER XXI.

VÉVETTE'S SORROW.

OF the sensation called forth by this last event it is scarcely necessary to speak. Nothing so extraordinary had ever happened in D——, not only “within the memory of man,” but even,—as Monsieur le Maire proclaimed,—“in the annals of history.” A young man of good birth,—a handsome, clever, gay, hunting-and-shooting gentilhomme,—was accused of the murder of a snuffy old bourgeois, of a hard-fisted old usurer, who was as much

disliked as he who was accused of murdering him was popular! True, the strange alteration in Raoul's manner, so generally commented upon, was immediately referred to; but, as compared with the enormity of the crime, all this sank into nothing; and the past of the fine, generous young fellow, who, without having had a "chance" in life, had "got on" all by himself, mastered a good, sound education, and never deserved an enemy, rose up now in the minds of his townsmen, and protested against the awful accusation under which he laboured.

From the moment when young Morville was arrested less was known of what took place than had been hitherto the case, and the public mind seemed in a fair way to be tortured by the efforts made to preserve

secrecy. This much was known, that, between the hour of his arrest and midnight, two telegrams had been exchanged between D—— and the chief town of the department, which was rather more than eight English miles distant; and D——, as we know, not having a telegraph station, on each occasion a man on horseback had to be sent off,—which produced a great impression.

The day following Raoul's arrest more telegraphic messages were despatched to and fro, and it was even rumoured that Monsieur le Sous-Préfet might be expected in the course of the day.

Do what the authorities would,—and they did do their utmost,—some few scraps of information did ooze out; and it remained an averred fact that the

brigadier had stayed more than an hour in La Maison Prévost ! Nay, that he had actually breakfasted with Madame Jean in her kitchen,—it was her second breakfast,—and that she had brought from the cellar, and devoted to the especial usage of Monsieur Frédéri, a bottle of some old Burgundy by which her defunct master set extraordinary store. How did this get known ? Well, there are assuredly genii who preside over the longings of human curiosity ; and in this case the particular genius was supposed to be Nicholas, the “ out-door man,” who had seen the wine brought up from the cellar, and not got one drop of it to drink.

Disjointed, garbled evidences, therefore, did, as I have said, leak out, and the public ended by obtaining some few scraps

wherewith to still its hunger; for Madame Jean, though a very inaccessible woman, was mortal, after all, and could not wholly withstand the amount of flattery with which she was assailed that day. Why, she received in her kitchen the visit conjointly of those two leading persons, Madame Valentin and Madame Joséphine le Vaillant, who, in chorus, styled her their dear Madame Jean, and promised her, the one, some liqueur des îles, sweet enough to ruin all her teeth, the other, some very curious snuff, against neither of which seductions was that stern female proof.

By the time, then, that noon had been rung out from the church steeple of D——, several small facts had crept forth, been eagerly pounced upon, and, naturally

enough, distorted. It seemed clearly ascertained that with the robbery Raoul would be proved to have nothing to do; and that, of course, obtained credence at once. But, on the other hand, a frightful proof of his guilt was whispered about. It was stated that the shoes found in the wooden box with the money, and so much too small for any of the feet on which they had till now been tried, fitted young De Morville perfectly! It was asserted that, with the exception of trying on the shoes,—which was an invention of the Maire's,—Raoul had, as yet, not been subjected to any investigation; that he was kept very privately, and was not to be examined till precise instructions came from the *chef-lieu*.

Touching the woodcutter, somewhat more

was known, and he was reported to have made some very strange depositions. He was said to have declared that the whole night preceding the murder had been spent by him inside old Prévost's house!—a fact which, as Madame Jean remarked, “would have made your blood run cold, if it was not such a palpable impossibility.” And here, again, opinion was obliged to incline towards the conviction of Prosper's partial insanity. Then, again, when simply questioned as to what was his acquaintance with Raoul de Morville, he merely stared, hastily said he was the best shot in the country, and refused any further answer. In reality the Breton appeared with each passing hour, to be narrowing his attention more and more to one single point, namely, to his own personal guilt, and to the certainty of achieving

forgiveness by expiation. He was more mystical than ever, and had passed the night in praying, singing the "De Profundis," and covering the walls of his cell with his favourite writings and images, produced by means of a bit of charcoal, which the gaoler saw no harm in letting him have. All his ideas ran the same way. "Expiation!" was the word for ever on his lips, and he paced up and down his prison, or squatted on the floor, a crucifix in his hands, and muttering: "The sacrifice of blood!" or, "The price! the price! O Lord! the full price!" or, "As I sinned, so I pay!" When not thus occupied, he was stubbornly silent and sullen, refusing to exchange a syllable with the gardien whom it had been deemed advisable to place with him in his cell.

“Why am I to be tormented?” he had once said. “I have owned my crime; they know it up there. What more is required? Why not give me my chance quickly? I have purchased my salvation; why do they shut the gates through which I am to go to it?” This very fixity of ideas on the part of the bûcheron threatened to make the case a vastly complicated one.

“It will be extremely hard for justice to see the way out,” observed the doctor, “for the longer the whole lasts, the more rooted become the convictions,—or delusions,—of that wretched old man, and the more difficult it will be to discover what is fact and what hallucination. He gets madder with every half-hour of solitude, and we shall end by, in reality, possessing only two positive certainties,—one, that Martin Pré-

vost was murdered, and the other, that Morel had something to do with it. But what then? I doubt our ever getting very far beyond that."

Somewhat later in the day Monsieur le Curé's Lise made her appearance in her master's study, and announced to him that la demoiselle Vévette wished to speak to him. The Curé was walking backwards and forwards in evident perturbation of spirit when this took place, and he at first looked rather vacantly at Lise, who repeated her message. Before he had found time to express his readiness to receive her, Vévette was standing at the room-door, and one moment after they were together alone.

The girl came forward with both her hands stretched out, which the Curé took in both his, and then he looked at her. She

was making strong efforts to speak, and her lips quivered and twitched, and she gasped, whilst the contraction in her throat prevented all distinct utterance. "My child!" said the priest, tenderly. Again she tried to speak, but in vain; and clutching his fingers in a tighter grasp, she sank upon her knees; and, resting her head upon the Curé's hands, burst into a fit of violent, irrepressible sobbing.

He raised her up, placed her in a chair, laid his hand gently and reverently upon her head, and seating himself near her, left her to compose herself, without attempting to comfort her by useless phrases.

When the first paroxysm of grief was a little abated he spoke to her. "You have done well, my poor little one, to come to me at once," he said; "for if consolation, and

hope, are to be had anywhere, it is here. You know that there is no limit to my devotion to you ; you know that I promised your mother on her death-bed, that I would always watch over you."

Vévette pressed her handkerchief to her eyes ; and, after a last struggle, looked up, and, though still with difficulty, she spoke : " Father," said she, and though the voice shook, the expression of the face was strangely resolute, " whatever comes, I will be Raoul's wife. Help us, or I shall die ! " and she clung to the sleeve of his soutane.

" I will help you," replied the priest impressively, but without manifesting the slightest surprise ; " but, my dearest child, will you help me to help you both ? Will you do your best ? Will you, for his sake,

be calm,—that is, try to be so,—and will you really follow the instructions I may give you ? ”

“ I will,” answered Vévette, never taking her eyes off his face, or her fingers off his sleeve.

“ Well, then ; let us try to put some order in our thoughts and in our proceedings. Tell me, does any one in your own family guess at what you have just told me ? ”

“ No one.”

“ I confess,” continued the priest, “ I have never had the remotest suspicion of all this ; though, perhaps, to a man of the world, it might have appeared inevitable. How long have you been engaged to Raoul ? ”

“ I don’t know, *mon père*,” answered she

simply, "but I think always. You know we were children together, till Félicie and I went to the Visitation; and when we came back home, it was always the same; and I never could marry any one but Raoul."

The Curé sat for a moment silently, with compressed lips and knitted brow.

"Of course," he then said, "you are convinced of Raoul's innocence?"

Her eyes flashed fire, and her cheeks burnt as she cried, "As convinced as I am of my own existence! As convinced as you are too!" she added triumphantly.

The Curé looked at her and leaned back in his chair. "Yes, Vévette," he rejoined, "I am morally convinced that Monsieur de Morville had no hand whatever in the murder, but that is not all. Innocence is not sufficient always, and we must guard

against complications. There are some very strange facts in this case, and the more we believe in our friend's guiltlessness, the better we must be prepared to meet them. One thing would be, in any other case, immensely in his favour, and that is, that Prosper Morel denies his complicity altogether."

"Well, then," exclaimed Vévette joyfully, "what more can be required?"

"A great deal more, I fear, for you see Prosper is himself a most unsafe witness. It is a very delicate matter to deal with a man who is more than half mad; facts have to be weighed."

"But no fact can possibly criminate Raoul," cried Vévette impatiently.

"In your mind and mine, no! But we are not magistrates, and I fear that Richard

Prévost has been forced to make a deposition that implicates——”

“Richard Prévost!” interrupted she indignantly, and springing to her feet, “Richard Prévost! that wretched, vile, cowardly creature! Oh! how I always hated and despised him! What has he dared to say?”

“Vévette!” said the Curé, rising also, and confronting the girl, whose usually gentle aspect was literally transfigured with rage and contempt, “Vévette, calm yourself and attend to me. I was never a particular friend of Richard Prévost’s. His nature has nothing in it sympathetic for me. I have always regarded him as a selfish, weak, purse-proud man; but I am obliged to say that in this case he has behaved well, —very well. You must believe me. Mon-

sieur Prévost has not only behaved well; he has behaved with delicacy and kindness, and shown the utmost repugnance to bear any testimony against any one; but, as in nearly all such cases, there are facts which are embarrassing, and——”

“Oh! forgive me, mon père! forgive me!” entreated Vévette, the tears streaming afresh down her checks. “I will speak ill of no one, I promise you; but it is so hard to bear;—and all the harder that I know my own sin in loving Raoul as I do; loving him better than everything!” and she wrung her hands in despair.

“What is this?” asked the Curé, seizing her hands in his, and not sorry to divert her thoughts into a new channel; “what is this nonsense, Vévette? You mean to be Raoul’s wife, do you not, if it pleases God to bring

him safe out of all these troubles? And as I know you, I know beyond all doubt that you will at all times be worthy to be his wife,—be pure and spotless as snow.” He looked hard at her, and spoke slowly.

And she, with a deep blush, whispered “Yes, I will.”

“Well, then,” he resumed, with what was almost an accent of irritation, “what is all this absurdity,—all this exaggeration? We have trials and troubles enough before us; don’t let us increase them by our own voluntary act. Let us try to act and think uprightly, honestly, and not get entangled in any of the villainously crooked ways of over-scrupulousness. Beware of that, Vévette. It all comes from the false teachings of the convent. I know it well; it’s not the first time I’ve had to deal with it.”

“Monsieur le Curé,” interrupted Vévette; “it is all too late now. I cannot repent, but I know my sin. I know I am risking my salvation in loving him as I do, but I will risk it. I will risk life and soul for him now.”

“You will do no such thing,” interrupted the priest, in an extremely stern tone. “You shall learn to distinguish between real right and real wrong, my poor child, or I will not help you. I will have no false morality; above all, no false purity,—which is of all things the most impure. You shall see the truth and worship it. You shall love God and fear Him, and bear whatever He gives you to bear,—mark you, whatever it may be. But when once you are the wife of the man you have chosen, you shall love him with all your heart, wholly and entirely,

and so that you shall love nothing else in the whole world half as much. And you shall do this because this is Christian law, the law of God, whatever all the Jesuits and all the nuns in all the convents in Christendom may tell you to the contrary. And now, my poor dear child, go home, try to be calm, lift your whole heart up to God, and rely upon me utterly."

Strengthened, though somewhat abashed, by the Curé's resolute ways, Vévette prepared to obey. When she had reached the door, "Mon père," inquired she, "may I not know what it is Monsieur Richard had to say? You see I am quiet now; and I will never speak ill of Monsieur Richard again."

The Curé reflected, and answered at last: "Perhaps I ought to refuse, but it would be worse if you heard what has happened from

any one else. Promise me to be courageous, and to trust in Providence for help. Monsieur Richard has been obliged to produce a letter which he found after his uncle's death, in which Raoul asks old Prévost for two thousand francs, and says that if he does not obtain them within a week, life is worthless to him. The letter is dated just a week before the murder."

"Raoul never wrote it," exclaimed Vévette.

"Raoul did write it, my child," retorted the Curé, "for I have had the letter in my hands, and read it."

"Has Raoul seen it?" she asked wildly.

"Not yet, it has not been shown to him yet; they are waiting for further instructions from the chef-lieu." And then, seeing that Vévette was almost fainting

from the effects of this last piece of news, "My child," he added gravely and tenderly, "the discovery of this letter does not destroy my moral conviction in Raoul's innocence. It must not injure yours. Go, and trust in God, and at all moments rely upon my devotion."

And she went, mournfully, but determined to do her best.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE JUGE D'INSTRUCTION.

As the doctor had predicted, the complications of the case became more embarrassing with every hour, and when the “authorities” had arrived at D——,—which they did the third day after Raoul’s arrest,—and an “instruction” had for the second time been set on foot touching the murder of Martin Prévost, the proceedings were quickly involved in such intricacy of detail, that the wisest of the magistrates declared there was no means of seeing clear in the

matter. This being so, and the natural tendency of all French lawyers being granted, of course the current of professional opinion set in dead against the prisoners, and more, even, against Monsieur de Morville than against Prosper.

Everything combined to make Raoul the more interesting culprit of the two; and the singularly sharp, inhuman propensities which invariably develop themselves in a Frenchman the moment he has to do with the workings of criminal law, gave themselves full swing directly there was a probability of a condemnation in the upper ranks of society.

No one who does not live in French society,—who is not “of it,”—will ever attain to a thorough knowledge of the inordinate measure of that society’s con-

servatism. There is scarcely anything in the way of injustice or cruelty at which the individual in France will stop if you appeal to him in the name of "society," and remind him of his protective duties as a member of it.

And the origin of all this ferocity,—as it is of nearly all cruelty,—is simply fear. To be governed, defended, and if needed, avenged! to be in every possible and imaginable way "taken care of," is the eternal ideal of a Frenchman! And the most perfect lamb of a cotton night-cap maker, whose wife leads him the life of a dog, will turn into a very hyæna if you put into his hands the fate of one of his fellow-creatures suspected of crime against purse or person. There are no merciful jurors in France, as there are few,—if any,—perfectly

just judges. Bring a human being before them as an "accusé," and bench, bar, and jury are all predisposed to believe him guilty, are all more or less desirous that he should be proved so. In the case of a juror, the one guiding sentiment is, "This might have happened to me!" In the case of the magistracy, the ardour of pursuit is inflamed to a degree incredible to those who have not seen it with their own eyes.

The innocence of a mere human being, a unit in the social sum total, is of comparatively no consequence. Think of poor, dear, unoffending, unprotected "society,"—that is, you and me, and "everybody" generally,—if one of these horrible beasts of prey gets loose!

Now all this amount of cruelty and cowardice, animating every single func-

tionary, from the Juge d'Instruction down to the Garde Champêtre, took Raoul de Morville for its butt. In the first place, he was in reality more interesting than the wood-cutter; and in the next, no intense feeling divides itself. It chooses arbitrarily, and there, where it has become fixed, it concentrates all its energy. Raoul was, therefore, the pet victim, the favourite of this dreadful race, and he or she was but ill received who ventured to hint at the possibility of his innocence in the presence of any one belonging to *la robe*.

The townspeople of D—— however, imperfectly informed as they now were, continued to behave in a not totally discreditable manner. There were parties for and against the accused; and, supposing him to be proved absolutely innocent, free from all

possible suspicion,—so perfectly spotless, in short, as to render his being “let loose” again manifestly without danger to themselves,—there were people in D—— who would be actually glad of his acquittal; which was saying a great deal.

The Juge d’Instruction sent down to investigate the case of the Prévost murder was a hard, opinionated man, whose zeal was, on this particular occasion, stimulated by two different causes,—one, that his colleague in the original proceedings of seven months before had evidently made a mess of the whole business; and the other, that he himself had been twice unlucky within the last twelvemonth,—namely, had twice seen criminals, prejudged and precondemned in his own mind, escape him. He was determined this should not be the case now, and that if

Raoul got out of his clutches it should not be his fault. The natural consequence of all this was, that the whole course of the instruction was directed against Monsieur de Morville, whilst the Breton was treated as of less importance. Towards Richard Pré-vost the behaviour of the Juge d'Instruction was almost deferential; he reproached him with too much leniency only, with a culpable disregard for the sacred interests of "society," in screening, as it must be admitted he had done, a man so evidently guilty! Still, the magistrate was willing to call this an "amiable weakness,"—so long as he was not himself expected to exercise it,—and Monsieur Richard being the wealthiest member of the community in D——, came to be truly a "representative man;" and "society" becoming, therefore,

as it were, incarnate in him, the Juge protected him accordingly. But from first to last he went his own way, would listen to no suggestion from any one,—not even from the Curé. He disliked priests, he said!—and meant to leave this inquisition of his into the Prévost murder as a model of sagacity and penetration to all juges d'instruction to come.

Raoul was kept with unmitigated severity in solitary confinement, it having been resolved to collect the entire amount of evidence against him before subjecting him to the first interrogatory. The letter found by Richard Prévost after his uncle's death was in the hands of the Juge. He pronounced it, as far as his opinion went, "quite conclusive," but reserved it as the one proof wherewith to crush Raoul's

defence, whenever he attempted to make any.

Now, what were the results of the examinations which Prosper Morel had to undergo? They were very unsatisfactory, and extremely hard to get at, for he sometimes refused doggedly to answer at all; at others, he insisted upon the presence of the Curé, which the Juge would not permit, and perpetually declared that since he had confessed his crime, that was enough, and that he ought to be allowed the full and entire benefit of expiation without delay.

One thing he persisted in from the outset, namely, that Monsieur de Morville had absolutely nothing to do with the whole, that he scarcely knew him, and had, he believed, never spoken to him in his life.

From two or three small facts which came out, and which we will relate in due time, this seemingly proved too much. Consequently it increased suspicion, and made the bûcheron's denials of Raoul's complicity unavailing.

As far as Prosper's own statement went, here was what, with infinite trouble, was made out :—He had assassinated old Pré-vost on the morning of the 14th of October of the previous year. He had had “ words ” with his master some days before, and had, in fact, been turned out of his service on account of the complaints made against him for poaching. Subsequently, his master consented to keep him on ; but the bûcheron had not forgiven or forgotten the offence, and had been terrified by the notion of how insecure his means of livelihood were, ex-

posed as he was at any moment to be turned adrift, and die of hunger on the roadside. This had driven him to commit the crime. This “and the counsels of the Tempter,” he added. And when he was asked who the “tempter” was, he invariably replied, “The devil in the form of a man !”

Who this “man” was he stubbornly refused to say, and when driven too far, would sit down and oppose silence only to all questions. “Take him back to his cell and lock him up till he chooses to speak ; I can wait for ever !” was the Juge’s sole resource ; but to this the Breton always yielded ;—the notion of perpetual and solitary confinement, with no “chance of expiation,” as he termed it, being full of invincible terror to his gloomy, superstitious nature.

The manner in which the crime had been committed was, according to the account extracted from the *bûcheron*, as follows :— The moment Madame Jean and Nicholas were both gone out, Prosper stole from his hiding-place, —where that had been he refused to say, —and crept up-stairs to his master's room. On looking through the key-hole he perceived Monsieur Prévost, already dressed, and standing in front of his desk, which was open. He knocked at the door, and when told to come in, began by asking pardon for coming at such an early hour, —it was then about half-past six, —but he said that, being, —as his master knew, —obliged to go to Jouzy, —a village some five miles off, —to deliver some timber, he had thought it well to come and consult Monsieur touching the

arrangement to be made about a certain quantity of wood to be furnished for sleepers to the railway administration. He reminded old Prévost that when at Jouzy he was not very far from the M—— station, and that, instead of losing another day, he might as well settle about the sleepers at once. He said he was persuaded his victim would immediately search for the minute of the agreement made with the railway people, and that he should then have him at his mercy. This was precisely what happened. Martin Prévost bent forwards and pulled out a drawer in his desk in which he kept papers of importance; and while he was in the act of so doing, Prosper took a deliberate aim from behind with a hammer which he had concealed under his blouse, and hit him just above the nape

of the neck. Stunned by the blow, old Prévost fell without uttering even a groan, only stretching forth his arms. The murderer avowed that, after his victim had fallen, he struck him twice or three times more. He could not tell precisely how many times, but he said he struck him to make sure he was dead.

The manner of his escape was clear enough, and,—favoured as the abominable deed had been by chance,—easy enough to understand. Wiping the hammer on the clothes of the murdered man, he concealed it again under his blouse, and crept down-stairs. He then went into the store-room opening on to the court, in the window whereof, as we may remember, a pane had been taken out. He admitted that he had himself, during the night, extracted this

window-pane quite at his ease. The opening was large, sufficient to allow of the passage of a man's body. He got out that way into the court, and crossed it to the kitchen garden. There he found the pair of shoes of which we have heard; and there another act of the drama took place, which we will give in the Breton's own words.

"I took off my own shoes where the pavement of the courtyard ceased, tied them with their own laces to my leathern belt, and waited."

"For whom?" asked the Juge.

"For the devil," was the reply; "and he came quickly. He gave me the box; it was a small one that used to stand on the top of a press in Monsieur's room; it had no key; it shut with a hook only; he opened it, showed me the gold and the

pocket-book ; shut it again, and I put it under my arm and went away. To cross the garden so as to mislead by the foot-marks, I shoved the fore part of my feet into the shoes, and walked as well as I could,—it is a very short distance,—trying to make a very heavy indent in the earth. Outside the garden comes the field that leads down to the little stream running into the Chôlet high-road. There was not a soul anywhere within sight ;—seven o'clock had not yet struck ;—so I made my way across the field down to the edge of the stream.”

“ Still in those small shoes ? ” inquired the Juge.

“ Still with the fore part of my feet in those shoes,” was the answer.

“ It’s impossible,” retorted the magistrate ; “ simply impossible ! ”

“Then ask me nothing more,” was the bûcheron’s rejoinder ; and half an hour was spent in inducing him to speak. Then he resumed his story.

“On the edge of the water,” he said, “I rested, took off the shoes, opened the box,—which was just big enough to hold them,—put them into it, and walked bare-foot down the stream to the road. All trace was then lost. I dropped my hammer among the stones at the bottom of the water, and if you look for it there, you will find it. I now put on my own shoes, saw that there was no one in sight, crossed the high-road quickly, plunged into the woods on the opposite side, and knew I was safe then. I made my way round, by a *détour* of more than an hour, to the place where I was arrested the other day, and

where I have lived almost ever since. I buried the box there, and over it I raised at first a hut of branches and twigs, where I could find shelter if it rained hard ; later, I built what stands there now, and I tried to construct a chapel."

"When did you do that?" was asked.

"After the Feast for the Dead."

Beyond this, nothing was to be learnt, and all the bullying of the Juge d'Instruction was of no use. The hammer was sought for in the stream, and found ; and, so far, the old man's statements received material confirmation. But the Juge d'Instruction, whose mind was made up beforehand, would not accept one word about the use made of the shoes. These fitted Raoul de Morville perfectly, and that was proof enough of his guilt,—more than sufficient,

combined with his letter to the murdered man.

To do Richard Prévost justice, the fact of his having had to produce this letter seemed to cause him unutterable pain. The Curé called upon him, and, as a friend of Raoul's, spoke to him upon the fearful subject, and was touched by the grief he showed. Monsieur Richard inquired from him to what it was possible that Raoul alluded by the closing words of his letter to old Prévost, in which he mentioned a "service" rendered to his mother? The Curé said there was a very good reason for it.

"It was in the time of my predecessor," he recounted. "I was then Vicaire of D——, and already intimate at the Château, and at La Morvillière. Madame de

Morville and Madame de Vérancour were bosom friends, and I was the intermediary of the charities their limited means allowed them to dispense. Madame de Morville was just eighteen, and a wife of not a year's standing. Old Madame Prévost, your uncle's mother, was an old woman, who died a couple of years later. I would fain not speak ill of my neighbour, but I believe your uncle's father to have been about as completely wanting in all good qualities as ever man was. He ill-treated his wretched wife, who was older than himself, and above all, he insisted on her openly professing the impious doctrines he himself professed. The unhappy woman,—who had no particular convictions of any kind, and no great stock of goodness either,—had one tender point. Your uncle Martin

was then a young man. He fell ill of typhus fever, and was at death's door. La Mère Prévost, as she was called, was in such despair, that she came in secret to my superior, the then Curé of D——, and implored his help. He did what he thought right ;—I don't think it was so ;—he told her to repent, to do penance, to return to her religious duties, and to give whatever she could in charity. She brought him five hundred francs the next day ! But now comes the pith of the story. Where did she get them ? It was supposed she had stolen them from her husband ! One thing is certain, that at the end of the month she was in great danger of being turned out of doors or beaten to death. His avarice was beyond description. Madame de Morville saved her. She gave her all

she had, which was three hundred francs, and borrowed two from Madame de Vêrancour, which she repaid little by little. What they feared was, that our Curé should get into trouble, which he would have done had your uncle's father found out what had happened. But any how, Madame de Morville saved your great aunt ; and she never forgot it ; for in her last illness,—she became devout after Prévost died,—I myself heard her tell her son never to forget what she owed to Madame de Morville."

"And Monsieur Raoul knew of this?" asked Richard Prévost.

"I think Madame de Vêrancour told it him when he was a boy ; but I am not quite certain."

With Monsieur de Morville the case stood ill, and in the mind of the Juge d'Instruc-

tion his guilt was evident. Prosper Morel said he did not believe they had ever spoken together. This was at once disproved by the church beadle, who, on the day of All Souls, saw Raoul return into church after every one had left, and remain "in close conversation,"—so he stated,—with Prosper Morel "for full ten minutes,"—the Juge wanted him to say a quarter of an hour, but he wouldn't. This was directly after the Curé's famous sermon.

Then the Vêrancour family, and Monsieur Richard, and Monsieur le Curé had all recognised Raoul late one night on the road, coming out of the path leading up to Prosper's abode! Where could he be coming from, if not from visiting his accomplice?

And the fatal shoes, too, that fitted him so well!

All went against Raoul ; and when the Juge thought he had already morally convicted him, he resolved to crush him past all possible resistance, with his own terrible letter. “And now, pray, what do you say to that ?” he exclaimed, triumphantly, after reading the document. “Do you deny having written it ?”

“Certainly not !” replied Raoul proudly, “for it affords one clear proof of my innocence. I did write it, and Monsieur Prévost answered it, and answered it by sending me the two thousand francs !”

At this, the exasperation of the magistrate knew no bounds ; he positively insulted the prisoner ; but Raoul flatly refused to answer one other question until he had been allowed to write to his uncle the admiral in Paris, to send him Martin

Prévost's letter. He wrote, sent the key of the secrétaire in which the letter was kept, and then told the Juge d'Instruction he would not submit to any further inquiry till the answer came. It would be forty-eight hours' delay, still there was no preventing it ; but what puzzled and annoyed the Juge more than the delay was that, if Martin Prévost really had of his own free will lent Raoul the two thousand francs, half of the case for the prosecution was destroyed.

And "la vindicte publique !" where would that be ?

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE TRIAL.

Not only the letter came, but the Admiral himself brought it, and at this point nothing could be clearer than the defence. Martin Prévost's letter to Raoul was dated the 13th of October, the day before his death, and ran thus:—

“MY DEAR YOUNG FRIEND,

“I have well considered your request, and I have decided to grant it. Here are the two thousand francs for which you seem

to have such pressing need. You most likely exaggerate the use they will be to you ; if not, I shall be glad to have helped you, and if they do serve you, and you repay me, you will have taught me that a kindness is not always thrown away. Hitherto I have found that it did no good whatever, either to the doer or the receiver.

“Yours truly,

“MARTIN PRÉVOST.”

The Juge d’Instruction was so vexed that he tried several means of neutralising the effect of this document ;—suggested that it might be forged ! but its authenticity was immediately proved. Then he flatly declared that it did not diminish the probability of the prisoner’s guilt, for that he might,

having received these two thousand francs, have murdered old Prévost in order to obtain more.

Raoul had been forced to avow a part of the real truth, and to admit that this sum of two thousand francs was given to M. Léon Duprez that he might speculate with it. This was tortured into a heavy charge against him, and he was denounced as one of those adventurers of our age, who will do anything to get money !

Raoul now confessed that when the sum confided to Leon Duprez was lost, his position became—to himself—intolerable, for he was no longer indebted to a man who, remembering the service rendered to his own mother by Madame de Morville, requited it voluntarily by a service to the latter's son ; he stood indebted to Monsieur Richard Pré-

vost, a man he scarcely knew, and had no particular reason to like, and he could not even reveal the circumstance of the debt owing to the uncle. "I had but one thing for ever before my eyes," said Raoul; "the necessity for saving every sou of my salary, in order one day to be able to relate the facts to Monsieur Richard while returning him his money." In order to do this he had deprived himself of the very necessities of life, and this was his simple reason for taking at night a fourteen miles' walk across the country instead of paying the three francs to the diligence from the station.

Not only did the magistrate refuse to admit this explanation, but it was evident that the avowals of pecuniary embarrassment to which,—however humiliating they were,

—Raoul was obliged to have recourse, prejudiced his examiners still more against him. He was, by his own showing, extremely poor, therefore, argued the French judicial mind, capable of anything! It would take a vast deal now to make out his innocence. The Admiral,—who discovered his nephew's real position in all its details for the first time,—behaved admirably, and assured Richard Prévost that the money owing to his uncle should be refunded in a week, the time to write to Paris and go through the formalities of getting the sum cashed through the Post Office. This did something, but still other circumstances were not got rid of; and one fresh circumstance had occurred which looked very ugly indeed for Monsieur de Morville.

It was proved by two or three witnesses

that the letter R was written over and over by the Breton between, or by the side of, the P's and M's. They were great big capital letters. They were existent on the 25th of April,—the day of the St. Marc,—and they were non-existent on the morning of the 27th, when the Maire went up to La Chapelle à Prosper. Now, a dozen persons remembered Raoul's presence at the fête of the 25th, and his being one of the group to whom the son of the Juge de Paix told the story of the "large capital R's," after which the Maire had said he would go up and "see the whole with his own eyes."

But worse again than this, a farm labourer who was coming across from Jouzy in the middle of the night of the 26th, and who took the short cut by the path leading near Prosper's shed, was surprised by seeing some

one rubbing very hard at the board where the Breton's "images" were known to be drawn. He thought it was the bâcheron himself, and went nearer, but it was not him, it was a bourgeois, and he wore a straw hat.

"Was it like the one the prisoner usually wore?" asked the Juge.

"Well;—" the witness couldn't say, "but he rather thought it was!" It was bright moonlight, but he only saw the man's back. Witness was in a great hurry, for he was going to see his wife who was in service at D——, and who was ill, and he had to be back again at Jouzy by seven or eight o'clock in the morning. This again told sadly against Raoul. Evidently the letters meant Prosper and Morel, and Raoul and Morville; the thing was as clear as day,

and all further interrogatories now were time wasted ; so at least the Juge opined ; and he made out the committal of both prisoners, who were despatched to the central gaol of the department, situate in the chef-lieu.

Six weeks passed by, and towards the middle of June the case was to come on. The chef-lieu du département was a small town, and could scarcely house all the people who flocked to it to be present at the trial. Besides that, a large number of the principal inhabitants of D—— were forced to attend as witnesses. The Vérancour family, the Curé, Richard Prévost, the doctor, the Maire, in short most of the notables of D—— had to take up their quarters for a few days, at all events, at the assize town.

The acte d'accusation was made out with

an unmistakable animus against Raoul, whilst the Breton was treated as a wretched, weak-witted, superstitious too' in the younger man's hands; and after the trial had lasted three days the impression touching Monsieur de Morville's culpability had not been removed. Monsieur le Curé's persuasion of his innocence had never varied from the moment the letter from old Prévost was found sending him the two thousand francs. He scouted all idea of his not being loudly pronounced guiltless, and obliged poor Vévette to share his belief, and to preserve strength enough to hide her own secret from her father and sister.

It was a lovely June evening, and Félicie and Vévette were sitting at the open window of their little salon in the hotel of the "Armes de Bretagne," when the doctor

came in. "Well," cried Vévette, eagerly, "to day's 'audience' seems to have been very favourable! Papa's testimony, he thinks, produced a real effect. What a shame it is to keep on torturing a man in such a way when they know he is innocent, and that he must be acquitted!"

"Doctor," said Félicie, more calmly, "you look uneasy; has anything fresh occurred? The trial lasted long to-day."

"Yes," rejoined the doctor, "something has happened that is unpleasant. The testimony of the man, Colin Mercier, who saw some one rubbing at the black board behind Prosper's chapel, but did not see who it was, might be got over, for Monsieur Raoul had probability on his side when he said that it would have been a most extraordinary fact that he should be up in the woods at one

o'clock in the morning instead of being quietly at home in his bed ; but——”

“So then it was at one o'clock in the morning that the man was seen rubbing out those great big R's?” interrupted Vévette, with an accent of contempt.

“Yes,” replied the doctor, “but that is not all. Raoul's argument was destroyed. For unhappily at eleven o'clock on that very same night Raoul was met by Daniel Leroux, the farrier, coming down the lane from the church at D——, and after exchanging a bon soir with him, Daniel saw him walk on towards the high road and cross it.”

“Mon Dieu !” cried Félicie, with a vivacity unusual in her, “Mon Dieu ! this is dreadful.”

“It is very perplexing,” added the doctor

thoughtfully, "for this time, you see, he was recognised."

"What did Raoul say to that?" asked Félicie, with anxiety.

"He turned white as a sheet, I am sorry to say, and absolutely refused to answer any other question."

"The case stands thus, then," observed Vévette, who had neither stirred nor spoken; "at one o'clock on the night of the 26th to the 27th, Raoul is now supposed to have been seen erasing those initial letters which point at him, and at eleven on that night he was positively spoken to on the road. That is a strong case against him," she added slowly, and with a curious intensity of look and tone.

"It is so," replied the doctor.

Vévette seemed absorbed in her reflec-

tions. "As he is not guilty," she said after a pause, and as if speaking to herself, "there is a murderer somewhere,—but who is it?"

"Probably old Prosper alone," remarked the doctor, "and all the rest is in his imagination; but the case is a bad one for Monsieur Raoul, for, unluckily, when you come to have to do with justice, innocence and acquittal are not the same thing."

"And Raoul might be condemned?" said Vévette.

"You take it quietly!" retorted Félicie; "but it is a most horrible thing. And the question is of the life of a man we have known all our lives,—a man of our own class, too!"

"Human life is an awful thing before God, be it whose it may;" murmured

Vévette, and there was a solemnity about her that must have struck her two companions had they not been too busy with their own thoughts.

Vévette sat still and silent till the doctor rose to go, and then she rose too, and left the room. It was twilight now, and the moon was just heaving herself slowly up behind the towers of the cathedral. It was a glorious evening. The next morning was the fourth day of the trial, and at ten o'clock as usual the judges took their seats upon the bench. The court was crowded, as it had been on each day. The windows had to be opened on account of the heat, and a long ray of bright sunlight streamed in, and fell upon the crucifix at the extreme end of the long low hall, and just at the President's back.

The prisoners were brought in, and, accompanied by the gendarmes, took their places on the seats allotted for the accused. The Breton looked as he had done all along, a perfect type of illuminated stupidity, if you can conceive the two things going together. Half of the time he was on his knees, with his bony hands clasped together on his breast, or busy telling a big chaplet of wooden beads, with his wandering eyes glaring out of his gaunt head, casting mute appealing glances at the crucifix. In Raoul there was a great change; a fearful change since the previous day; so said those who had been present at the last audience. He was frightfully pale, and there was an air of stern despair about him that chilled those who gazed.

Just as the President was about to declare

the day's sitting open, an usher of the court was observed to put a letter into his hands. The judge read it apparently with great attention, and then, as he seated himself, said : —“In virtue of our discretionary powers we admit Mademoiselle Geneviève de Vérancour to depose to a fact which bears upon the present important and complicated trial. Let her come forward.”

At these words Raoul started back as though he had been shot, and leant against the wooden partition which separated the dock from the public. Through the crowd there ran one of those quivering vibrations familiar to all who know the magnetic impulses of crowds, and this was followed by a deathlike stillness, as through the parting waves of the human sea two figures passed, preceded by the usher of the court.

It was the silence of awe. Vévette, simply attired in a plain grey stuff gown, with a little white bonnet, and black veil, came forward, leaning upon the arm of the Curé for support.

“Collect yourself, and do not be alarmed,” said the President kindly, as the Curé took off the veil from the sweet face of the girl, who at that moment seemed to have fainted. “Let a chair be brought for the witness.”

But she had recovered herself already. “I can stand,” she said, in a low but audible tone, and she came one step forward, resting her left hand upon the Curé’s stout right arm. “I am quite ready.”

“Your name, age, and domicile?” asked the President, with an expression which was almost paternal in spite of his august and terrible functions.

“ Marie Angélique Anne Geneviève de Vêrancour ; seventeen last March ; resident at the Château de D——,” was the reply, in a low but firm voice.

“ You have a deposition to make which Monsieur le Curé of D—— tells us is of great importance to the case under examination ; is that so ? ”

The girl trembled convulsively, made a hurried sign of the cross, and as though, at the last moment, losing all her courage, clasped her hands in agony, and turning to the priest, ejaculated : — “ Oh, mon père ! ”

Raoul dropped upon both knees, buried his head upon his arms crossed upon the bar, and groaned audibly. White, as though every drop of blood had left her, stiff as though she were a corpse risen out

of her coffin, Vévette now stood forward, and in a voice, the singularly penetrating tones of which will be remembered to their dying day by all who heard them, she spoke thus :
“ Monsieur le President, on the night of the 26th to the 27th of April last, at one o'clock after midnight, Monsieur Raoul de Morville was with me in the pavilion of the garden belonging to my father's house.—the pavilion, the entrance to which is through the door in the so-called ‘ Rampart,’ opening into the lane leading to the church. At a little before twelve he first came into the pavilion, where I had been waiting for him from a little past ten. It was a good deal past one when he left. This I affirm upon oath.”

There ran a hushed murmur through the crowd like the whisper of the awakening

wind through leafy trees. Every individual ear and eye were strained towards Mademoiselle de Vêrancour, every individual breath was held. "God in heaven bless the girl!" suddenly burst from the lips of the poor Admiral, down whose bronzed cheeks the tears trickled unconsciously. "She is a hero!"

The President imposed silence on the public, and saying it was necessary to resist all emotion, proceeded with his formal interrogatory. When he asked the accused what he had to say to the statement of the last witness, Raoul raised his head, and cast an involuntary look of such passionate love at Vêvette that it stirred the soul of every man and woman there, and then, lowering his eyes to the ground, "Mademoiselle de Vêrancour," said he, "was my

dead sister's friend ; we have all been brought up together as brother and sisters ; she has wished to save my life ; but I cannot admit the truth of her depositions."

But at this Vévotte rose up, lovingly indignant. All shame was gone, and all girlish indecision. The woman was there fighting for her love, and stepping forward to the table in front of the bench, on which were laid the written accusations, she spoke again. "Monsieur le President," she said, in a clear, sweet voice that rang through the court. "I ask permission to make a detailed statement of facts. We shall see whether Monsieur de Morville will deny what I have to assert. It is true we were brought up together as brother and sister ; but we grew to be more ; and we had sworn

to each other to be one day man and wife. Monsieur de Morville's object in life was to earn honourably what would render it possible for him to ask my father for my hand. I did not know of the hopes he had had of a quicker realisation of this wish. I knew that his uncle the Admiral had obtained for him a position in Paris. When the father of Monsieur de Morville fell suddenly ill, and he returned to D—— on leave, I saw at once that he was very unhappy, and I feared——I can't say what; for I had but one fear, lest something should separate us. We had no means of meeting save in secret, and that was extremely difficult. He was to return to Paris in a few days; I was too wretched! I could not bear it! I wrote to him and told him to come to the pavilion in the

garden at ten or half-past ten at night, where I would meet him. I was sure every one would be gone to bed by that time, and that I could go out without being perceived. I was in the pavilion before half-past ten, and I waited. I heard every hour and half hour strike ;—half-past nine, then ten, then half-past, then eleven, and then half-past eleven ; and then at last he came, and we talked long of all our hopes and fears. It was likely to be our last meeting for we could not say how long ; and we were, and we are, all in the whole world to each other ! At last one o'clock struck ! Everybody knows what a loud deep bell our parish church has. You can hear it miles distant. When I heard that, I was frightened, and told him it was time for him to go. We spoke a few more last words and

then we parted, and when I ascended the terrace steps and went through the dining-room window, the half-hour after one was striking. Ask Monsieur de Morville if he can deny that!" she added, a smile of absolute triumph curling her fevered lips. "Ask him for the few lines I wrote to him. He will have certainly kept them!"

"Accused, what have you to say?" repeated the President.

But Raoul was powerless; crushed by both despair and joy. To have the intensity of poor Vévette's love for him thus proved, and at the same time to feel that were she his wife the next day it would not, in public esteem, restore the bloom to her honour; this was too much, and coming after so much misery it utterly vanquished him. He had covered his face

with his hands, and was sobbing like a child. There were few in the crowd who were not weeping too, at sight of these two poor young lovers, who were trying so hard to see which should sacrifice most to the other.

At last, Monsieur de Morville stood up, and, with quivering features, said, “Monsieur le President ! I appeal to you not as a judge, but as a man. I cannot answer ! You feel that I have nothing to say !”

“Then I have !” exclaimed Mademoiselle de Vérancour, and, turning towards the prisoner—

“Raoul !” she cried, “remember that the worst is told. On your life hangs my life, and my honour can only be retrieved by our love. Raoul, for the love of God, and for my sake, speak, and tell all the truth !”

There was a pause, during which you heard how each man held his breath, and then, with downcast eyes and singular embarrassment, Raoul confirmed all that Vévette had said.

“When did you receive the witness’s letter?” was asked of him.

“About eight o’clock, at the café. I had but just time to run across the fields to La Morvillière, speak to Brigitte, —my father’s old servant,—make her believe I was gone to bed, and then steal out of the house by the back way, and walk back again to D——. It takes a good hour and a quarter to go from D—— to our house, and it was striking eleven when I turned into the lane that skirts the kitchen garden of the Château. I stopped to see that there was no one near, and I

heard footsteps. I walked down the lane, and Daniel Leroux, the farrier, passed. He said good-night to me, and I answered his greeting. The last stroke of eleven was striking then. I immediately went on. Instead of going to the gate that opens into the garden, I went past it, walked right by Leroux, keeping before him till I reached the high road, there I crossed, and went straight into the woods, watching to see him out of sight. He took to the right hand up the road towards his own house, and when I no longer feared to be seen, I came out from the trees, re-crossed the road, ran down the lane, opened the gate, and in the pavilion found V^e—Mademoiselle Geneviève waiting. All she has said is true," he concluded in an almost inaudible voice. At this moment Raoul's

innocence was the innate conviction of every human being present; but there was still a great deal to be elucidated.

“How did you contrive to get your note given to Monsieur de Morville?” inquired the President.

“I gave it to Mère Jubine’s daughter Louison,” replied Vévette, blushing deeply.

“At what hour?”

“At about four.”

“Did you tell her to deliver it directly?”

“Yes; at once, without any delay.”

Louise Jubine, who was amongst the witnesses, and had already deposed to some minor detail, was recalled. She was a very fine-looking girl, rather over-dressed for her station.

After the preliminary questions, all of which she answered in confirmation of

Vévette's deposition, the President addressed her. "If you received that note at four, with charge to deliver it at once, why did you only give it to the accused at past eight?"

Louison hung her head, grew scarlet, twisted her cap-strings round her fingers, and said she had "rather not reply."

"But you must reply," retorted the Judge, sternly. "You are upon oath, and if you don't answer truly, I will send you to prison."

Louison trembled all over, but when the question was again put she stammered out—

"Because, before taking it to Monsieur Raoul, I gave it to Monsieur Richard Pré-vost." A strange murmur arose from the crowd at this announcement.

“Why did you do this?” inquired the Judge. “Tell the whole truth, girl, or beware of the consequences.”

“Because,” she answered, with a little less difficulty, “Monsieur Richard had told me, ever since Monsieur Raoul’s return from Paris, always to tell him everything that went on between Monsieur Raoul and the Château, and particularly whatever concerned Monsieur Raoul and Mademoiselle Vévette.”

“And you were so intimate with Monsieur Richard that you implicitly obeyed all his commands?” added the Judge.

The girl put her handkerchief to her face, and her reply was inaudible. Monsieur Richard was now called as a witness and sworn in. He looked ghastly. He said the heat and his long-continued state of ill

health made him quite faint. The President ordered a chair to be brought for the witness. When the question was put to him, WHY he had given to Louise Jubine the directions she had stated, he said he was absolutely ignorant of the whole thing, and that Louison had invented the entire story. And so saying, he attempted to make light of it, and smile, but his lips stuck to his teeth as though they were gummed, and the smile wouldn't come.

All this time the *bûcheron* had remained immovable, muttering his prayers, telling his beads, and gazing at the crucifix. "Prosper Morel!" said the President, "do you still persist in declaring that Raoul de Morville was not your accomplice?"

"I don't know him!" reiterated the old

man, with a gesture of impatience. "I have said so all along."

"Then who was your accomplice?"

"I will not answer that," mumbled the woodcutter. "I murdered my master. Let me go to my doom in peace. Let me go to my expiation!"

"Prosper Morel!" suddenly exclaimed the Curé, in a loud, solemn tone, and the prisoner rose to his feet mechanically, and stood stiff as a soldier at "attention." "Prosper Morel!" he repeated, "I told you to distrust your own heart, and to beware of revenge; but the truth must out. You must speak, for your silence will cause a second murder to be committed."—The Breton shook and shrunk into himself.—"Prosper Morel! as you hope at your last hour for forgiveness from Him,"—and the

priest stretched forth his arm and pointed at the figure of Christ over the tribunal,—
“tell the whole truth now! The innocent must be saved. Who was it tempted you to murder Martin Prévost?”

The old man clutched his beads with a tighter grasp, and as though compelled by a power he dared not resist. “Monsieur Richard!” he said, in a hollow tone, and then took to telling his beads again, as though he were telling them for his very soul.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE SENTENCE.

THE whole situation was altogether changed by the arrest and imprisonment of Richard Prévost, which ensued immediately on Prosper's confession. After the first few preliminary questions had been put to the woodcutter and to his newly-discovered accomplice, the proceedings of that day were suddenly brought to a close, and the trial was suspended for two or three days, while a fresh act of indictment was made out,

which placed Monsieur Richard by the side of the other two prisoners, accused of the murder of his uncle, Martin Prévost. During this short lapse of time poor Vévette had other terrible battles to fight; but nothing daunted her now, and she fought all her enemies stoutly,—even her father and sister. As might be supposed, Mademoiselle Félicie's virtuous resentment passed all description, and she was for adopting the most stringent measures. The Vicomte had decreed the immediate removal of his erring child to her convent at Poitiers, in spite of the protests and supplications of the Curé of D——. The Admiral proposed that a first cousin of his own, an elderly widow lady, inhabiting a country house in the environs of the chef-lieu, and proverbial for the severity of her morals and piety,

should take charge of Mademoiselle de Vêrancour till her marriage with Monsieur de Morville. "She shall never marry him," had replied the Vicomte.

When this was repeated to Vévette, she merely sat down and wrote a note to her father, of which she sent a copy to her sister also. It only contained these words:—
"You have forced me into rebellion, when all I asked was humbly to implore your pardon. Marry Raoul I will. I would have married him at the foot of the scaffold. If any obstacle be put in the way of this union, and of my possibility of doing my duty and ensuring his happiness, I will proclaim the betrothal of my sister to Richard Prévost in all its details. I am driven to this. I would rather die than do it, but I will not sacrifice Raoul." The answer to

this was, that the unnatural and abandoned girl might do what she chose, and go whither she listed; that her father cast her off, and desired never again to hear her name.

Félicie's secret was saved, and the Admiral, accompanied by the Curé, placed Vévette under the care of the Baronne de Préville, who for the time being promised to be as a mother to her.

The trial was resumed three days after its suspension, and in the corner of the seat devoted to the accused was now seated Monsieur Richard, a miserable object truly; so wizened and shrivelled that twenty years seemed to have passed over him; and as he sat, with his head propped upon a pillow, he perpetually smelt at a bottle of eau-de-Cologne, and seemed for ever trying to per-

suade himself that, rich as he was, no harm could in the end come to him. His defence of himself was so utterly weak and silly, he so evidently broke down the instant he was seized in the pitiless machinery of legal investigation, that morally his guilt was plain at once, and—said the technical men—“he deprived the case of all its interest from the outset.”

Raoul's position was now a totally altered one, and his whole bearing showed it. He knew his innocence was triumphantly proved, and he could afford to feel, if not pity for the two wretched men between whom he stood, at all events awe at what was likely to be the judgment for their crime. The aspect of old Prosper had also undergone a change. All traces of insanity had disappeared, but a terrible war was being waged

by the Breton between his gratified revenge and his strong desire not to imperil his immortal soul. Every now and then a glance of tiger-like fierceness shot out from his eyes, and went scorching over his fellow-culprit, to be suddenly atoned for by convulsive mutterings of prayers.

The story told by Prosper Morel was simply this :—His master had, upon the last complaint made against him by the Maire for poaching, discharged him with such exceeding harshness, that he had vowed to be revenged. Besides, he had no earthly means of gaining his bread ; and he was frightened past all reasoning by the prospect of dying of hunger in a ditch. Well ; his old master gave him a respite, and consented to keep him on “for this once ;” but he, Prosper, did not forgive his master, and his fright

endured, for he felt he might be sent adrift at any hour. Of this state of his mind “Monsieur Richard,” as he always called him, took advantage; and only a very few days after old Prévost had agreed to give the bûcheron another trial, the young man tempted him to his fall.

The following was the mode of perpetration of the deed:—On the night of the 13th of October the bûcheron, who was lying in wait in the kitchen garden just beyond the courtyard, was introduced by Richard Prévost into the latter’s own room, while Madame Jean was giving his supper to Nicholas down in the kitchen. Nothing could be easier, and concealment was perfect. Monsieur Richard, feigning one of his feverish headaches, said good-night to his uncle,—who was, as usual, busy

with accounts,—and retired to his own room, where he had concealed Prosper.

The only little circumstance that was at all out of the common way was elicited from Madame Jean in her testimony as to what had occurred on that night. Monsieur Richard, she said, invariably slept without a night-light, having on the table by his bed-side a candle and a plentiful supply of lucifer-matches. On the night of the 13th, however, he said he should like a night-lamp, for that the pain in his head was so severe that he might, perhaps, not have strength to strike a light, should he want one during the night. A lamp was accordingly placed on the chimney-piece, and prevented Richard Prévost from being in the dark, all alone with the future murderer of his uncle.

The bûcheron's description of the hours

that then elapsed was that he himself had slept a good part of the time, but that, whenever he woke up, he saw Monsieur Richard in his arm-chair, sitting up reading by the light of the little lamp. About five o'clock, he said, the atmosphere grew chilly, and Monsieur Richard shivered very much, and got up and took a bottle from a cupboard, and gave him,—Prosper Morel,—a glass of something to drink, which made him feel reckless of anything or anybody. It was neither brandy nor rum ;—he knew the taste of both ; it was a white liquor, very strong, but very bitter. Monsieur Richard then softly opened his door, beckoned Prosper on, and they crossed over the passage to the lumber-room, where, with the implements the Breton had in his pockets, they, without making the least noise, took out the window-

pane. That done,—which was the work of a quarter of an hour,—they went back into Monsieur Richard's room, and waited till Madame Jean should have got up and gone out to mass, and Nicholas have set forth on the errand to the post-office for which Monsieur Richard knew he had had instructions overnight. A few minutes before half-past six the house was empty of every one save Martin Prévost. When they heard the house-door close on Madame Jean, Monsieur Richard unlocked his room-door, let out Prosper Morel, and, pointing with his finger to the room up-stairs, whispered these words, “Whatever ready money there is in the caisse shall be yours.”

“And then I went up-stairs and did it,” said the old man; “and when all was over I stamped three times on the floor,—as we

had agreed I should do ;—and Monsieur Richard came up, but he only came to the door. He would not come in. He pointed to a small deal box standing on the drawers. I brought it to him. Then he said I must empty the large open drawer of the *caisse*, over which ‘Monsieur’ had been standing when I struck him. I did so. He put, as I have already stated, all the gold and notes and pocket-books into the deal box, and gave it to me, and then, too, he showed me the shoes, and I shut ‘Monsieur’s’ door, and we went down-stairs, and I got away.” The *bûcheron* said he supposed Monsieur Richard had gone to bed directly after he had seen him,---Prosper,—safely on the other side of the courtyard.

To all this Richard Prévost opposed only

the weakest system of defence, and so utterly miserable was his whole attitude, that upon the face of the eminent barrister appointed to defend him, and lured down from Paris at a moment's notice, and at almost the cost of his own weight in gold, you might read the blankest disappointment, and something nearly akin to disgust. His sagacity, however, quickly told him that on his own client he could rest no hopes of success; but that on the eccentricity of the Breton's character must depend his last chance of obtaining a mitigation of his client's fate. So he endeavoured to prove the absolute madness of the wood-cutter, and built the entire system of the defence on the fact of Prosper having been the only murderer, and all the rest being simply hallucination. But this did

not now suit the old man's humour: he had been brought to tell the whole story, and now that it was told, he strenuously resisted every attempt to impugn the thorough accuracy of his depositions.

“I was discharged by the Juge d’Instruction as innocent,” said he. “I had nothing more to fear. I was free! If the truth, and the fear of God’s justice had not driven me to it, I needed never have been where I now am. For the first few weeks after the deed, I did not seem to mind it much,—only I did not like seeing anything that reminded me of ‘Monsieur.’ I lived up yonder, only coming down into D—— to church. But I took to getting sleepless at nights; and in all my dreams, when I did sleep, I saw my old master, and he pursued me and haunted me. He said he could not get up, and I have

sometimes felt him crawling about my feet. and catching hold of them, and asking me to help him to get up. . . . Well, then, the judgment of God came, and on All Souls'-day of last year He put it into Monsieur le Curé's mouth to say the words that were to save my soul. Since then you know all. I have no more to say. I murdered my master, and now, for the love of our dear Lord Jesus, let me go to my doom; let me expiate what I have done, and secure the salvation of my soul!" Beyond this he would not go, but every one felt he had told the truth, and all the rhetoric of the French bar would have been powerless to alter this conviction.

When the presiding Judge put it to the jury whether the three accused were guilty of the murder of Martin Prévost, those

twelve wise citizens returned to the box after a five minutes' absence, and their foreman gave as a verdict that, as to the accused De Morville, not so much as a shade of suspicion rested upon him ; that, as to the other two, they found Richard Prévost and Prosper Morel guilty of the wilful murder of Martin Prévost, but with "extenuating circumstances !"

Whether these wonderful "circumstances," inseparable, as it would now seem, from the verdict delivered upon every difficult case in France, were really attributable to the complications of the trial itself, which passed the understanding of the jury, or to the eloquence of the defendant's counsel, was never known.—That eloquent pleader said the whole was owing to him, and he was paid in proportion.

The sentence was, of course, penal servitude for life.

When the sentence was passed, Richard Prévost had fainted, and had to be carried away apparently lifeless, and the Breton dropped his beads from his hands, and stood transfixed. When the gendarmes touched him and forced him to move, he clasped his hands as if in agony, and went his way between the two guardians of the law, muttering the "De profundis" over and over, with the convulsive ardour of sheer despair.

CHAPTER XXV.

CONCLUSION.

DURING the few days that the bûcheron remained in prison previous to his removal to his permanent place of detention, he was quite inconsolable, and inaccessible even to the arguments of the Curé, who attended him constantly. His one fixed idea being that the sacrifice of blood was alone valuable, and that by his death only could he expiate his crime, Prosper regarded himself as doomed to eternal punishment through the unbelief of his judges. The notion that,

from sheer impiety, the earthly umpires of his fate had refused to help him to the salvation of his soul, so filled the Breton with rage, that every now and then he gave it vent in the most fiercely gloomy denunciations against all his countrymen in general, but in particular against those of the spot where he had sinned and been sentenced. It was of no use that the Curé sought to persuade him that, by submission, he might expiate his crime; and that the long-enduring silent horrors of penal servitude might be turned to an even better account than death. It was all of no use. Death was his chimera,—his passion,—and he despaired because he had been deprived of it.

The two last days, however, of his stay in prison he had become more calm, had quietly partaken of his prison fare; and,

when told that four-and-twenty hours later he would be "translated" to his final destination, he had asked pardon of his jailor for all the trouble he had given him. When his cell was opened the next morning he was found dead. He had hung himself.

The means by which he achieved his end were not easy. Dressing himself in his upper clothing, he had taken off his shirt and twisted it into a thick rope. He had contrived to draw his bed under the kind of square loophole which served him as a window, and heaping table and chair upon the bed, had been able to reach the iron bars, round which he managed to knot his newly-invented cord. The rest was not difficult. It merely required the overthrow of the chair and table. Both were found upon the ground. The old man had accom-

plished his purpose, and had carried out what he believed to be the law. In his dark, superstitious mind the fact of the punishment constituted everything, and in his craving to be redeemed by paying the price of blood, he wholly lost sight of the sin of self-murder.

As to Richard Prévost, it was impossible to execute his sentence, for he never left his bed again, and lingered two months in the gaol infirmary. He shrunk from the Curé of D——, but longed for doctors, for he fancied they could make him live; and he loved life so dearly! It was all one that life was to be infamy. It was life!—That it was to be poverty, labour, silence, solitude,—no matter; it was to be life!—To go on breathing, feeding, sleeping, and waiting for the next day! Dr. Javal came from Chôlet, and

examined him, and said there was no need for him to die; and Richard caught at this, and would have kissed Dr. Javal's hands; and the old doctor from D——, with a queer sort of expression on his face, observed, that there might be no need for him to die, but that the great difficulty was that, somehow or other, he couldn't live. "People will die sometimes," said he, "although we think they ought to remain alive." After passing through a species of typhus-fever, and jaundice, and then a low fever that resembled ague, Richard Prévost was obliged to hear that he had not many days to live, and that he had better wind up his accounts with the other world. This announcement terrified him less than had been supposed, for his strength was so exhausted that the tight grip itself with which he had held life was

relaxing, and he would probably let existence go without any very great struggle.

And so it was. When "the time came," he had no longer any power left wherewith to retain what he had ceased to be able to use, or, indeed, to comprehend. He sent to St. Philbert for the Abbé le Roy, and confessed to him. The strong piety, the robust faith of the Curé of D—— were too much for him; he dreaded them, and foresaw comfort in the small practices and small prayers, in the medals, beads, and images of the narrow-minded priest of St. Philbert. He wanted some one to hush-up his conscience and tell him "not to be afraid;" and this he got. The Abbé le Roy, indeed, called his end an edifying one; and, from the way in which he spoke of it, very nearly ran the risk of inspiring

naughty boys with the notion that crime was a fine thing if it necessarily brought about such sweet humility in the departing criminal. Richard Prévost confessed. Yes, confessed everything! and did not seem to find any particular hardship therein.

When all was told, of course the Abbé le Roy impressed upon his penitent the necessity of making public whatever was not of a private nature in his confession; so that, while the name of Félicie was never guessed at by a living creature, the details of the crime Richard had instigated were fully revealed. Every word the Breton had spoken was strictly true. Richard Prévost had tempted him to murder the old man, and the murder was committed precisely as Prosper Morel had stated. The one thing alone about which Richard really did seem to

care was Raoul de Morville's forgiveness, which, of course, was generously granted. He said he could not withstand what the circumstances of Raoul's letter prompted him to do; and once that letter in the hands of the Juge d'Instruction, things took their own course, and Richard Prévost believed himself safe.

He had heard with terror of the "capital R's" drawn by Prosper amongst his other figures, and resolved to invent some means of destroying them;—for he thought they indicated an intention on Prosper's part to accuse him. He had naturally kept watch on Raoul,—and enlisted Louison for that purpose into his service;—for he never knew what might occur; and when he read Vévette's note to Raoul, he,—Richard,—felt certain that there must be two or three

hours in the night for the employment of which Raoul could never account. By this he profited; stole out of his own house by the back way, went up to the bûcheron's shed, found him asleep, effaced all trace of the fatal letters, and believed no one had seen him; but persuaded himself that, had any one done so, it would be easy to turn suspicion towards Monsieur de Morville.

When Richard Prévost had ended his terrible confession, the Abbé le Roy began to indulge in descriptions of the various and irresistible forms which "the demon" takes in order to lead men astray; and by sheer force of habit, he warned his penitent, as if there were any further opportunities of transgression lying before him. Above all, he was hard upon Satan, for having

assumed the shape of the unwitting, and so pious, and well brought up Mademoiselle Félicie ! “It is always thus !” said he ; “it is by that most unholy, most abominable of all passions, love, that the demon plots the fall of men. If you had not been driven to madness by your unhappy uncle’s refusal to allow you to aspire to the object of your choice, you would never——”

The dying man stopped him. “Pardon, mon père,” he whispered, laying his cold clammy fingers on the priest’s arm, “I am innocent there ;—quite innocent ; it was not for Mademoiselle Félicie ; I could have done without her ! but I saw that my uncle might live a long time, and that I might die before he did even ; that, at best, I should probably be long past my youth

when I got his money ; and that seemed to me so very, very sad, so unjust, that it became unbearable ; and I was tempted, as I have told you. Indeed, that is the truth, the entire truth. Not Mademoiselle Félicie ! no, no ! I really could have done without her !” And that was the truth, and the Abbé le Roy was glad that it was so.

And so the cause of sin was not love, but greed. Impatience ! impatience to enjoy !

One person,—the only one from whom no secret could be kept,—fully confirmed Richard Prévost’s statement, and that person was Madame Jean. “Seigneur Jésus !” said she, when the priest of St. Philbert talked with her over her deceased young master. “I should never have suspected Monsieur Richard of loving any

one. I won't swear that he was capable of becoming a saint for money, but I would have sworn that he was incapable of committing a crime for love!" Now Madame Jean herself did, four weeks after Richard Prévost's demise, marry the brigadier de gendarmerie, and she gave as a reason that, "you couldn't tell whom to trust!" which enigmatical sentence was interpreted by the evil-minded into meaning that Madame Jean was afraid, if she did not marry the gendarme, of being murdered by him in order that he might steal her money.

As to Mademoiselle Félicie, her situation became promptly a satisfactory one,—which was gratifying, considering what a practical, right-thinking, meritorious young person she was, with so well-regulated a mind!

“All in such perfect equilibrium,” said the public. She went, immediately after the trial, to stay at Tours, with the worldly-minded relative who had been in the habit of sending her and her sister Paris newspapers. There she completely enslaved a stout, good-looking, middle-aged colonel, almost as well-born as he was intellectually common-place, and possessed of fortune sufficient to render the post of mistress of his house an agreeable one. With him Félicie de Vêrancour contracted a marriage which was a model for all proper and sensible marriages between well-born people. No hint of her so nearly becoming Madame de Châteaubréville, with the thousands a year of the then unsuspected criminal to spend, and for which, had the position been achieved, the whole department would have courted

her ;—no hint of this will ever, believe me, get abroad. Félicie will always, as she does now, go into that society which deems itself the best, and in it she will continue to be esteemed and honoured, being at the same time only just enough pitied, to prevent her being envied, for her close connection with that blameable young woman her sister, whom, to the end of time, Félicie will with a shudder of mourning virtue style “that unfortunate creature !”

And what of Vévette ? No opposition of any kind being offered by the Vicomte, the necessary formalities were accomplished, and Raoul and Vévette became man and wife, the ceremony being performed by the Curé of D——, and the Admiral being the chief witness. The Curé made them no discourse upon the occasion, he only blessed them from

the depths of his very heart, and solemnly told them to be all in all to each other.

The Admiral immediately offered a home to Raoul and his wife, until he could find some employment for the former. They all proceeded to Paris, taking with them Monsieur de Morville the elder, whose unconscious state saved him from all the miseries which had fallen on those nearest to him. The Admiral's means were not large, but he was respected, and had influence. He soon obtained for his nephew the post of vice-consul in one of the Spanish Republics of South America. It was an unhealthy place, where no man of any value would go, but where, if he could contrive to save life, fortune might be honestly made by a clever enterprising man. Of course Raoul accepted, and so did Vévette, and

they went forth together hand in hand, serene and grave, trustful in Providence, and convinced that total unselfishness alone, and passionate devotion to another, can sweeten the solemnity of life.

In the world they left behind them, both were severely judged. After the first emotion was over, the public unanimately condemned poor Vévette, and the masculine part of the community were angrily taken to task by all their female relatives if they allowed an expression of interest or compassion for her to escape them. "What an example for Julie or Marie, or Catherine or Louise!" That was the argument used, and it never failed of its effect; and the browbeaten male, whenever it was applied to him, hung his head and felt small; and so poor Vévette came to be regarded every-

where as a black, black sheep, and in one heart only, in that of the Curé of D——, will she for ever remain a “ewe lamb.”

If in ten or fifteen years Monsieur and Madame de Morville,—as is very possible,—return from their tropical exile wealthy, and with the renown of excellent services attaching to Raoul’s name, they will be what is termed “well received,” and perform the irksome function which is described as “going everywhere,” but “Society” will be on its guard against any intimate adoption of them; and the institution called in France *La Famille* will regard them as a menace, for *Pater* and *Mater-familias* will cordially unite in holding up their hands at sight of this erring couple, who, not content with loving, went and married for love.

That is the real crime; the mere love is

to be got over. Here and there a broken heart—voilà tout ! Not much harm therein ; but to go marrying for love ;—oh ! no !

“ What would become of us all,” would cry Society in France, “ if the matrimonial association were once to be established on the all-for-love principle ! ”

THE END.



